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Carlos Figueroa
University of Texas at Brownsville

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Abstract

A review of:

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Keywords

George W. Bush, United States politics, National security, Democracy, Authoritarianism, Human rights, War on terror

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State Power and Democracy: Before and During the Presidency of George W. Bush. By Andrew Kolin. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 251pp.

Many commentators, policymakers, and scholars over the past decade have suggested that U.S. unilateralism, in particular the Bush Doctrine of Preemption, is a new and necessary policy for an uncertain and dangerous post-Cold War 21st century world. Such a policy, others claim, was an inevitable outcome of the tragic events that occurred on September 11, 2001. Although these points have been critiqued, they nevertheless seem to persuade most people.^[1] One assumption underlying these views is that the U.S. federal government (and the President in particular) had to protect our democratic "way of life" from outside interventions. Another presupposition is that the Bush administration (and the complicit congressional Democrats) had no choice but to employ, temporarily, illiberal and anti-democratic political strategies and policies in order to safeguard our national security (including the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security), protect our global interests, and fortify democracy at home and abroad. But was the Bush Doctrine new, necessary, inevitable, and temporary? Or did this doctrine demonstrate another of a long line of repressive U.S. government political policies, inhumane social practices, and anti-democratic institutional and legal arrangements in the pursuit of state power?

Andrew Kolin's State Power and Democracy: Before and During the Presidency of George W. Bush provides one of the most compelling accounts on this issue. In eight well-crafted, historically rooted, and analytically rigorous chapters, Kolin does an impressive job of melding historical, social-political, constitutional and institutional data in illustrating the origins, development, consolidation and deployment of what he calls the "American police state" (13). Despite his over-reliance on secondary source materials, he makes a persuasive *continuity institutional* argument: that efforts by both Democratic and Republican presidents, Congress, and the federal bureaucracy to expand state power not only trumped the supposed liberal democratic values established in the founding era, but more accurately were part of elite political actors' mission to consolidate, through institutional and legal processes, an absolute U.S. authoritarian state that culminated in the George W. Bush administration (2-3). He states, "As state power grew, there developed a disconnect between the theory and practice of democracy in the United States. Ever-greater state power meant it became more and more absolute. This resulted in a government that directed its energies and resources toward silencing those who dared question the state's authority" (1). Kolin's argument is rooted in two underlying premises: 1) that the U.S. government and political elites have always sought to justify political actions and policies by constructing the "other"; and 2) that the manipulation of public opinion to establish so-called democratic consensus has always been essential to the normative goal of instilling mass conformity (and the occasional accommodation of reformist movements).

Kolin claims the U.S. government has engaged in often inhumane social, legal, and political practices, using the construction of the "other" to symbolize the un-American and anti-democratic elements that need to be suppressed or eliminated. He uses examples of the U.S. government establishing federal agencies and the establishment of similar state-level institutional and legal arrangements for the sole purpose of political repression; using mind-control techniques to produce democratic conformity; manipulating the mass media in order to shape favorable public sentiments; and using special congressional committees such as the House Un-

American Activities Committee (HUAC) for surveillance purposes, among others. According to Kolin, these practices and political strategies are often found in traditional police states (which he does not really define) but also undeniably in the U.S. For example, President Nixon employed the services of "the FBI, the CIA, and the IRS to accelerate measures against political dissent" (89). So, it seems that the U.S. government objective, regardless of which party sits in power, has often been to repress and silence mass-based democracy movements, and to broadly curtail any threats to U.S government authority anywhere.

Kolin's Chapter Four on "Absolute Power at the Expense of Democracy" is a must-read. The chapter covers the Johnson administration and Nixon era through the Reagan years, during which time the U.S. government expanded the federal bureaucracy for the business of political repression; a government strategy, according to Kolin, often triggered by events (e.g., federal building bombings) deemed threatening to broader national security conducted by those who were considered "political outsiders" (96). Kolin traces the history of U.S. surveillance programs, in particular the growth of intelligence bureaucratic agencies and programs in the 1960s-1980s that were often established for such legal and political regressive purposes. One of these was the Continental United States Intelligence (CONUS) program that "consisted of the U.S. Intelligence Command (USAINTC); the Continental Army Command (CONRAC); the Counter-intelligence Analysis Branch (CIAB); also part of the Chief of Staff Intelligence (OACSI); and finally, the Directorate of Civil Disturbance and Planning (DCDPO), later changed to the Directorate of Military Support (DOMS)" (95). By the mid to late 20th century, the U.S. government had already established the necessary deep rooted elements for supporting what the George W. Bush regime later accomplished, especially after September 11, 2001 – a legal-bureaucratic authoritarian police state. These types of federal programs (including Army Intelligence) served to monitor civilian activities to which protestors were identified as political outsiders and thus potential threats to national security.

Although Kolin does not explicitly make this connection, it seems likely that the idea for the so-called U.S. Patriot Act as a tool to fight the "war on terrorism" may have deep historical roots in the government's consistent dual national focus on surveillance and intelligence systems, premised on the idea that secrecy is necessary for ironically securing democracy and maintaining national security. Kolin does show however, that the U.S. government, and in particular the Bush administration, would find ways to justify secret actions and measures while increasing centralized national power through the Patriot Act (142 – 152). But, the Patriot Act also increased state powers as a reflection of national police state accepted practices for controlling mass democratic movements. For example, the police in Denver, Colorado arrested three nuns who were protesting against the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. These nuns "were arrested, handcuffed, and left on the ground for three hours and then jailed for seven months before trial...[they were] charged with sabotage and with obstruction to national defense under the Patriot Act provisions..." (153).

Kolin shows compellingly how the current American police state originated and took different forms historically by relying on illiberal, anti-democratic, and repressive bureaucratic, and legal mechanisms. Yet, even when presidents seem to make decisions within their constitutional and legal means, it is clear that these underlying mechanisms or norms sustaining the American police state are still maintained. President Obama has already shown a "great reluctance to

address the overall criminal nature of the [George W.] Bush administration in waging its [so-called] war on terrorism" (214). Suggesting that the U.S. government will indeed continue to uphold the same principles and practices institutionalized by the Bush administration even with a Democrat now in the White House. Although Obama has demonstrated that he is willing to shift from such anti-democratic practices by issuing Executive Order 13491 (for ensuring lawful interrogations),^[2] the police state that Kolin identifies actually has become even more complex in its political repressive practices at home and abroad under the guise of national security. Thus, "the mantra of a police state is that security always trumps civil liberties," liberal democratic practices, and broader citizenship (214).

However, Kolin does not comment on either the political economic factors or the role of international institutions (e.g., the IMF/World Bank) in fueling and shaping the historical development of the "American police state." All the major transitional moments in U.S. political history, for example from the Revolutionary War, Jacksonian period, Civil War, and Reconstruction to the Progressive, New Deal, and Civil Rights Eras and current so-called "War on Terrorism" epoch, arguably were underwritten by political economic elite interests for slave or cheap labor at home, in managing and exploiting foreign markets, in establishing friendly foreign governments, and in protecting overseas oil supplies. These elite interests also informed even the construction of the "other" as those who posed a threat to, or may have otherwise undermined American financial stability and broader state power.

Nevertheless, when the U.S. government engages in questionable legal if not unconstitutional practices for decades, as Kolin well illustrates throughout the book, it raises serious questions about the legitimacy of American liberal democracy, and any promise of an effective active citizenry against authoritarian state police actions. The historical and conceptual referents to which Kolin's book turns in his effort to deracinate the political, institutional and legal nuances surrounding the development of the American authoritarian police state ought to be taken seriously.

State Power and Democracy: Before and During the Presidency of George W. Bush should be required reading in both undergraduate and graduate courses in American Studies, Political Science, and American Constitutional History that focus on such themes as race, democracy and empire, democracy and American foreign policy, American political development, and the politics of U.S. citizenship. The book should be read alongside Donald E. Pease's "The New American Exceptionalism," Rogers M. Smith's "Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History," and of course Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States." Kolin's fine account provides a more realistic understanding of American political life that challenges Alexis Tocqueville's oft-quoted statement about the unique and perhaps romanticized notion of "Democracy in America."

[1] See Eric Hershberg and Kevin W. Moore, ed., *Critical Views of September 11: Analyses from Around the World* (NY, NY: The New Press/Social Science Research Council, 2002).

[2] Executive Order 13491 was issued on January 2, 2009 "in order to improve the effectiveness of human intelligence-gathering, to promote the safe, lawful, and humane treatment of individuals in United States custody and of United States personnel who are detained in armed

conflicts, to ensure compliance with the treaty obligations of the United States, including the Geneva Conventions..." See Presidential Documents, Federal Register, Volume 74, Number 16, page 4893.

Carlos Figueroa, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Government Department
University of Texas at Brownsville
Brownsville, Texas 78520