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## Assassination, Conformity, and Conscience

by Jacob G. Hornberger

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As most every American knows, we now live in a country in which the ruler possesses the unfettered power to assassinate his citizens. What an extraordinary situation. Who would have ever thought that America would end up with a governmental system in which the ruler possessed such omnipotent power?

Equally extraordinary, our ruler just happens to possess a powerful military and intelligence force (the CIA) to exercise such power whenever he wants. In fact, it's the most powerful national-security force in history. Given the supreme loyalty that the military and the CIA have toward their commander in chief, there is no doubt that if and when it comes to time to carry out their commander's orders to assassinate Americans, the military and the CIA will do so faithfully and loyally, especially if our ruler assures them that they are protecting our rights and freedoms by killing domestic threats to national security.

What are the standards by which our ruler targets Americans for assassination? We don't know what the standards are. We are not permitted to know. We're not even sure that there are standards. We're told that if our ruler disclosed the standards he applies when ordering the assassination of Americans, national security would be threatened. So, we just have to trust him to establish good standards in determining which Americans to assassinate. Since the assassins in the military and the CIA trust him, the idea is that the American citizenry should trust him as well.

One thing is for sure though: Regardless of the standards for determining who makes the national-security state's kill list, there is one class of Americans that stands zero chance of ever being targeted for assassination: Those Americans who openly and enthusiastically support the actions of the government.

It's difficult to imagine a more powerful inducement to conformity within the citizenry than that.

After all, every American must now factor the president's power to assassinate into his thinking. Men with families, especially wives and children, must consider the future. Sure, it's true that the national-security state has only assassinated a few Americans so far, but that's not really the point. The point is that the government now possesses the unfettered, omnipotent, non-reviewable power to assassinate Americans and to determine the standards for determining who is going to make the list.

What happens in the event of some deep crisis in the future? How can anyone predict how some future president — be it Barack Obama or Mitt Romney or Hillary Clinton or someone else — will react to foreign and domestic threats? There is no way to be sure, but one thing is for certain: There is no possibility that an American ruler would ever target for assassination an ardent and enthusiastic supporter of the federal government and its actions.

By the same token, those who remain silent would be left alone as well.

The risk of assassination — and such lesser-included powers as torture, military incarceration, and execution by tribunal — comes to those who have been critics of the government and its policies. For them, there are no guarantees.

Would the president ever target government opponents with assassination? In a deep crisis, anyone is capable of anything, especially when he wields omnipotent power. And given that the federal judiciary is standing by now and doing nothing to interfere with the assumption or the exercise of such omnipotent power, there is no possibility that federal judges would act any differently in the event of a deep crisis.

The problem is that in a deep crisis, government officials, especially those in the military and intelligence forces, inevitably come to view government critics as enemies of the state — fifth columnists — agents of the enemy — or simply as threats to national security who are demoralizing and dividing the nation. They're viewed upon as unpatriotic, divisive people who are implicitly helping the enemy prevail.

Consider the several dictatorships in the Middle East that the U.S. government has long supported and partnered with: Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Yemen, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, and others. Every one of them has left ardent government supporters alone. Instead, the people that the dictatorships in these countries have targeted for assassination, incarceration, torture, and execution are always the government critics — the protestors — those who oppose the tyranny under which they live.

Oh sure, government officials always call the people they're killing, torturing, and incarcerating terrorists or communists or simply threats to national security. And sometimes they actually believe it. The ruler, the military, and the intelligence forces convince themselves that anyone who is not supporting the government is, by definition, a threat to the national security of the country.

Would the U.S. government ever do this type of thing? Well, we know one thing: the U.S. government has long supported dictatorships that do it, so long as they are pro-U.S. dictatorships. No matter how ruthless the dictatorships have abused their citizenry, U.S. taxpayer-funded foreign aid has continued to flow into the dictatorships in the form of cash and weaponry, which obviously fortifies the dictatorship's power over the citizenry. In other words, the U.S. foreign aid enables the dictatorship to continue assassinating, torturing, incarcerating, and executing those who are resisting the dictatorship.

How have U.S. officials justified this? They have fully bought into the same rationale as the dictators whom they are supporting with cash and armaments — that the people who are being targeted for assassination, torture, incarceration, and execution are, in fact, terrorists, communists, or simply threats to national security who are trying to overthrow a pro-U.S. regime. Therefore, U.S. officials say, there is nothing wrong with continuing to buttress the power of the pro-U.S. dictatorships to maintain "order and stability" within their nations. The idea has been that by ensuring that the "terrorists" don't prevail in overthrowing the pro-U.S. dictatorships, the world remains a more peaceful and orderly place and the national security of the United States is protected as well.

So, given that the U.S. government believes in supporting dictatorships that assassinate, torture, incarcerate, and execute domestic critics or opponents of such policies, what does that say about the possibility that the U.S. national-security state might well exercise its omnipotent powers in a similar way against Americans, given the right circumstances?

That's what Americans now have to process.

Obviously, the safest route is to become an ardent and enthusiastic supporter of the federal government and everything that it is doing. In that way, if things ever go bad the citizen can point to his record of government support.

The second-safest route is to just remain silent and keep your head down.

The least safe route is to speak out against the federal government's support of dictatorships, its assumption of omnipotent powers, its policies of assassination, torture, incarceration without trial, execution by kangaroo tribunal, its rendition-torture partnerships with dictatorial regimes, and, well, the entire pro-empire, warfare-state way of life that has come to characterize the United States.

Conformity versus conscience. In the face of the president's unfettered power to assassinate Americans, that's now the choice facing the American people.

Conformity is obviously the safe route. But conscience is obviously the right route.