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## The Intellectual Dead End of Liberalism

*This is Bankrupt*

by PETE DOLACK

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The vacuous concept of the “third way” having degenerated into neoliberal idolatry, modern liberalism has reached its end. Sweeping pronouncements are ordinarily to be avoided, but the ongoing revelations of not only the Obama administration’s extraordinary spying campaign but Democratic Party leaders marching in lockstep with Republicans to celebrate it ought to be the coup de grâce.

Some difference remains between Democrats and Republicans on social issues, but that gap is shrinking and exists at all only due to social activism. Without pressure from below, that difference might not amount to much, either. What difference does exist arises from the extraordinary social extremism of U.S. conservatism, unique among the mainstream parties of the world’s advanced capitalist countries.

North American liberals and European social democrats have a long history of capitulation — we see the same patterns, whether it is Bill Clinton (and now Barack Obama) in the United States, Tony Blair in Britain, Gerhard Schröder in Germany, Jean Chrétien in Canada & etc. There is something much larger at work than President Obama’s lack of resolve. The sobering

conclusion is that his world view is not so different from that of George W. Bush. Democrats have much in common with Republicans.

But, but, but — what about Washington’s notorious gridlock? The rewards of office are at stake and, just like professional athletes, professional politicians who make it to the top levels are highly competitive. They like to win, a rather human emotion, and with a distinct lack of seriousness in tackling any real issue — political, economic or environmental — winning is about the only thing that matters. Fight, team, fight!

### **The Obama Administration’s Record**

Liberalism has ceased to possess ideas, however much individual liberals may yearn for alternatives. A partial list of Obama administration “achievements” makes for depressing reading:

\*Not simply keeping the Guantánamo Bay gulag open but force-feeding prisoners (torture by any realistic standard).

\*Stepping up the war against dissent through violent suppression of the Occupy movement organized by the Department of Homeland Security, waves of arrests and harassment of anarchists in the Pacific Northwest and harsh reprisals against government whistleblowers, among other offensives.

\*Widespread collection of telephone calls.

\*The gargantuan collection of personal information from online communications.

\*A president arrogating to himself the right to unilaterally kill people anywhere in the world, without a pretense of legal procedure.

\*A continual weakening of women’s fundamental rights to control their own bodies, often by making unilateral capitulations to Republican demands before negotiating.

\*A total failure to reign in “too big to fail” banks and a total failure to prosecute any financial industry executive for the chicanery that precipitated the financial collapse of 2008 and the ongoing stagnation.

\*Unquestioning acceptance of financial industry perspectives on economic matters.

\*Elevation of corporate maximization of profits above all other human considerations, embodied in a steady stream of one-sided trade agreements, the most dangerous one yet the Trans-Pacific Partnership being negotiated in secrecy.

Let’s not pin this on the personality of one person. Each fresh outrage by the Obama administration is met by a shrug of the shoulders or outright support by Democrats. They are nearly unanimous in their approval of the National Security Agency. They are already united

behind policies that exist, regardless of the ideology attached to them, to funnel ever more wealth upward. These two tendencies are not independent of one another.

There are various reasons that can be assigned as to the cause of the Democratic Party's — and, thus, liberalism's — steady march rightward: Dependence on corporate money, corruption, domination of the mass media by the Right, philosophical and economic myopia, cowardliness. Although these factors form a significant portion of the answer to the puzzle, an underlying cause has to be found in the exhaustion of North American liberalism. Similar to European social democracy, it is trapped by a fervent desire to stabilize an unstable capitalist system.

The political and intellectual leaders of liberalism believe they can discover the magic reforms that will make it all work again. They do have criticisms, even if they are afraid of saying them too loud, but are hamstrung by their belief in the capitalist system, which means, today, a belief in neoliberalism and austerity, no matter what nice speeches they may make.

The Right, on the other hand, loudly advocates policies that are anathema to the working people who form the overwhelming majority but have the mass media, an array of institutions and the money to saturate society with their preferred policies. But, perhaps most importantly, they have something they believe in strongly — people who are animated by an ideal, however perverted, are motivated to push for it with all their energy.

In contrast, those who are conflicted between their belief in something and their acknowledgment that the something needs reform, and are unable to articulate a reform, won't and can't stand for anything concrete, and ultimately will capitulate. When that something can't be fundamentally changed through reforms, what reforms are made are ultimately taken back, and society's dominant ideas are of those who can promote the hardest line thanks to the power their wealth gives them, it is no surprise that the so-called reformers are unable to articulate any alternative. With no clear ideas to fall back on, they meekly bleat “me, too” when the world's industrialists and financiers, acting through their corporations, think tanks and the “market,” pronounce their verdict on what is to be done.

### **Suppressing Dissent is Big Business**

And let us not be fooled by libertarian opposition to government spying; libertarians are among those most strongly rooted in the system. Although *any* opposition to the National Security Agency's Stasi state is welcome, libertarians are motivated by an irrational hatred of government — they would rather have the market decide all social questions. But the market is merely the aggregate interests of the most powerful industrialists and financiers. Moreover, the market has already weighed in — security is big business, a high-profit sector worth hundreds of billions of dollars a year that exists solely as the result of government largesse.

City police departments are now equipped as armies; a web of federal agencies works closely with local law enforcement focused on squelching dissent; and seemingly bottomless sums of money are doled out to finance a network of spying agencies, a proliferation of cameras in public spaces and the militarization of police departments and investigatory agencies.

That is big business, indeed, as a quick summary of 2012 financial results demonstrates:

\*Lockheed Martin, a military contractor, earned US\$2.7 billion on revenues of \$47 billion. More than 80 percent of its revenue comes from the U.S. government, mostly from the Department of Defense.

\*Northrop Grumman, a military contractor, earned \$2 billion on revenues of \$25 billion. Most of its business is with the U.S. government, with much of the rest from various other governments.

\*Boeing, a producer of military aircraft and missile equipment, earned \$3.9 billion on revenues of \$81 billion. The U.S. government is a primary customer.

\*Booz Allen Hamilton earned \$219 million on revenues of \$5.8 billion. One-quarter of its revenue came from work for U.S. spying agencies and 98 percent of its revenues comes from work for the U.S. government. Booz Allen had employed whistleblower Edward Snowden.

U.S. government military spending for fiscal year 2014 accounts for more than \$1.3 trillion, according to an analysis prepared by the War Resisters League. (The War Resisters calculation includes past military spending and other items not counted toward the regular military budget by the government.)

A government is not an abstract entity; it is an expression of the social forces within a society. The U.S. government — the Obama administration, past administrations and the “permanent government” of the security apparatus and the various bureaucracies — is the enforcer for industrialists’ and financiers’ dominant institutions — corporations — and many of those corporations profit handsomely from the equipment, materiel and services they sell to the government that provides their muscle. This is bankrupt, whether the liberal or conservative version.