

I know that it's been considered improper to bring up Hitler in the context of what the Bush administration did for the past 7 years, but I wish someone would explain to me how Bush's powers, as now revealed by those secret legal memos, were different from the dictatorial powers exercised by Hitler after the terrorist attack on the Reichstag in 1933, soon after Hitler became chancellor.

The purpose of the U.S. Constitution was to place constraints on the exercise of power. Yet, it's now clear that for the past 7 years Bush wielded the power to ignore all constitutional restraints on his power as part of his "war on terrorism." Since the president wielded omnipotent power over the American people, albeit secretly, how is that different from the omnipotent power that Hitler wielded over the German people?

As it turns out, for the last 7 years the U.S. military has wielded the authority to do precisely what it has been doing in Iraq and Afghanistan: engage in military sweeps here in the United States, bust down people's doors without judicial warrants, and take Americans into custody as "enemy combatants," denying them any constitutional protections or due process of law. How is that different from the power wielded by the Gestapo and the German military over the German people in the 1930s?

For the past 7 years the U.S. government has wielded the omnipotent power to secretly wiretap telephone conversations and email communications of the American people. How is that different from the power that the Nazi regime had over the private communications of the German people?

Sure, pro-tyranny advocates might respond by saying that Bush didn't abuse his powers, while Hitler did, but doesn't that miss the point? The point is not whether America has had a more benevolent dictator for the past 7 years than the German people did under Hitler. The point is that both the German people and the American people were living under some form of dictatorship — a type of political system in which there are no constraints on the power of the ruler. Remember: dictatorship entails the existence of omnipotent power, even if such power isn't always being exercised to its full extent.

The cases of Jose Padilla and Ali al-Marri do reflect the exercise of the omnipotent power wielded by Bush and his military forces over the American people for the past 7 years. Padilla is an American citizen and al-Marri is a foreigner. Both were arrested on American soil and given the enemy-combatant treatment — i.e., indefinite incarceration for years, denial of due process, denial of trial by jury, and touchless torture in the form of isolation and sensory deprivation.

For the last 7 years, Bush and his military have wielded the power to subject all Americans to the Padilla treatment. Why would that not be considered dictatorship?

How could the existence of such power not operate as a suppressive element within the press, especially when those legal memos expressly subordinated the First Amendment (and the Fourth) to the war-on-terrorism power of the president.

The terrible irony is the parallels between Hitler's assumption of omnipotent power and Bush's assumption of omnipotent power. Immediately after the terrorists attacked the Reichstag, Hitler secured from President Hindenburg the Reichstag Fire Decree, which suspended most civil liberties in Germany. Immediately after the terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9/11, Bush secured the issuance of legal memos from his Office of Legal Counsel that authorized him to subordinate the civil liberties of the American people to the omnipotent power of the president and the military.

The excuse that Bush used to assume his dictatorial power was the same excuse employed by Hitler to assume his dictatorial power — that the country was now at war — a “war on terrorism.”

Never mind that terrorism, like drug violations in the “war on drugs,” is a federal criminal offense subject to criminal prosecution in federal district court, not an act of war.

Never mind that the 9/11 attacks, just like the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, the terrorist attack on the USS Cole, and the terrorist attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, were direct blowback from U.S. foreign policy.

Never mind that U.S. presidents from at least as far back as Reagan and continuing through Clinton were battling terrorism without assuming dictatorial power.

And never mind that the Constitution does not even provide the president with the power to suspend civil liberties during times of real war.

As Barack Obama's chief of staff Rahm Emmanuel suggested, why let a good crisis go to waste, especially when it can produce omnipotent power for those who thirst for such things, whether in Germany, the United States, the Soviet Union, Cuba, or anywhere else?

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