

Looking Beyond Election Day: The Issues That Threaten to Derail the Nation

Written by John W. Whitehead
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While it may be months before the devastation wrought by Hurricane Sandy can be fully resolved, Americans cannot afford to lose sight of the very real and pressing issues that threaten to derail the nation.

What follows is an overview of the major issues that both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, despite their respective billion-dollar war chests, have failed to mention during their extensive campaign-trail stumping and televised debates. These are issues that aren't going away anytime soon. Indeed, unless we take a proactive approach to the problems that loom large before us, especially as they relate to America's ongoing transformation into a police state, we may find that they are here to stay.

Militarized police. Thanks to federal grant programs allowing the Pentagon to transfer surplus military supplies and weapons to local law-enforcement agencies without charge, police forces are being transformed from peace officers to heavily armed extensions of the military, complete with jackboots, helmets, shields, batons, pepper spray, stun guns, assault rifles, body armor, miniature tanks, and weaponized drones. As Paul Craig Roberts, former assistant secretary of the Treasury, observed: "Today, 17,000 local police forces are equipped with such military equipment as Blackhawk helicopters, machine guns, grenade launchers, battering rams, explosives, chemical sprays, body armor, night vision, rappelling gear, and armored vehicles. Some have tanks." In other words, what we are witnessing is an inversion of the police-civilian relationship.

Drones. As mandated by Congress, there will be 30,000 drones crisscrossing the skies of

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America by 2020, all part of an industry that could be worth as much as \$30 billion per year. These machines will be able to record all activities, using video feeds, heat sensors, and radar. Some drones are capable of hijacking Wi-Fi networks and intercepting electronic communications such as text messages.

SWAT-team raids. With more than 50,000 SWAT-team raids carried out every year on unsuspecting Americans for relatively routine police matters and federal agencies laying claim to their own law-enforcement divisions, the incidence of botched raids and related casualties is on the rise. Nationwide, SWAT teams have been employed to address an astonishingly trivial array of criminal activity or mere community nuisances – including angry dogs, domestic disputes, improper paperwork filed by an orchid farmer, and misdemeanor marijuana possession, to give a brief sampling.

Suspect society. Due in large part to rapid advances in technology and a heightened surveillance culture, the burden of proof has been shifted so that the right to be considered innocent until proven guilty has been usurped by a new norm in which all citizens are suspects. This is exemplified by police practices of stopping and frisking people who are merely walking down the street and where there is no evidence of wrongdoing. Making matters worse are Terrorism Liaison Officers (firefighters, police officers, and even corporate employees) who have been trained to spy on their fellow citizens and report “suspicious activity,” which includes taking pictures with no apparent aesthetic value, making measurements and drawings, taking notes, conversing in code, espousing radical beliefs, and buying items in bulk. Terrorism Liaison Officers report back to “fusion centers,” which are a driving force behind the government’s quest to collect, analyze, and disseminate information on American citizens.

VIPR Strikes. Under the pretext of protecting the nation’s infrastructure (roads, mass-transit systems, water and power supplies, telecommunications systems, and so on) against criminal or terrorist attacks, VIPR task forces (comprised of federal air marshals, surface-transportation security inspectors, transportation-security officers, behavior-detection officers, and explosive-detection canine teams) are being deployed to do random security sweeps of nexuses of transportation, including ports, railway and bus stations, airports, ferries, and subways. VIPR teams are also being deployed to elevate the security presence at certain special events such as political conventions, baseball games, and music concerts. Sweep tactics include the use of x-ray technology, pat-downs, and drug-sniffing dogs, among other things. These stings inculcate and condition citizens to a culture of submissiveness toward authority and regularize intrusive, suspicion-less searches as a facet of everyday life.

Invasive surveillance technology. Police have been outfitted with a litany of surveillance gear,

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from license-plate readers and cell-phone tracking devices to biometric data recorders. Technology now makes it possible for the police to scan passersby to detect the contents of their pockets, purses, briefcases, etc. Full-body scanners, which perform virtual strip-searches of Americans traveling by plane, have gone mobile, with roving police vans that peer into vehicles and buildings alike – including homes. Coupled with the nation’s growing network of real-time surveillance cameras and facial-recognition software, soon there really will be nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.

USA PATRIOT Act, NDAA. America’s so-called war on terror, which it has relentlessly pursued since 9/11, has chipped away at our freedoms, unraveled our Constitution, and transformed our nation into a battlefield, thanks in large part to such subversive legislation as the USA PATRIOT Act and the National Defense Authorization Act of 2012. These laws completely circumvent the rule of law and the constitutional rights of American citizens, re-orienting our legal landscape in such a way as to ensure that martial law, rather than the rule of law – our U.S. Constitution – becomes the map by which we navigate life in the United States.

Schoolhouse to jailhouse track. The paradigm of abject compliance to the state is being taught by example in the schools, through school lockdowns in which police and drug-sniffing dogs enter the classroom and zero-tolerance policies that punish all offenses equally and result in young people being expelled for childish behavior. As a consequence, school districts are increasingly teaming up with law enforcement to create what some are calling the “schoolhouse to jailhouse track” by imposing a “double dose” of punishment: suspension or expulsion from school accompanied by an arrest by the police and a trip to juvenile court. In this way, young people find themselves in an environment where they have no true rights and government authorities have near-total power over them and can violate their constitutional rights whenever they see fit.

Over-criminalization. In the face of a government bureaucracy consumed with churning out laws, statutes, codes, and regulations that reinforce its powers and value systems and those of the police state and its corporate allies, we are all petty criminals, guilty of violating some minor law. In fact, the average American now unknowingly commits three felonies a day, thanks to an overabundance of vague laws that render otherwise innocent activity illegal and an inclination on the part of prosecutors to reject the idea that there can’t be a crime without criminal intent. Consequently, we now find ourselves operating in a strange new world where small farmers who dare to make unpasteurized goat cheese and share it with members of their community are finding their farms raided, while home gardeners face jail time for daring to cultivate their own varieties of orchids without having completed sufficient paperwork. This frightening state of affairs – in which a person can actually be arrested and incarcerated for the most innocent and inane activities, including feeding a whale and collecting rainwater on their own property – is due to what law scholars refer to as over-criminalization.

Privatized Prisons. At one time, the American penal system operated under the idea that dangerous criminals needed to be put under lock and key to protect society. Today, as states attempt to save money by outsourcing prisons to private corporations, imprisoning Americans in private prisons run by mega-corporations has turned into a cash cow for big business. In exchange for corporations buying and managing public prisons across the country at a supposed savings to the states, the states have to agree to maintain a 90-percent occupancy rate in the privately run prisons for at least 20 years. Such a scheme simply encourages incarceration for the sake of profits, while causing millions of Americans, – most of them minor, nonviolent criminals – to be handed over to corporations for lengthy prison sentences that do nothing to protect society or prevent recidivism.

Endless wars. Having been co-opted by greedy defense contractors, corrupt politicians, and incompetent government officials, America's expanding military empire is bleeding the country dry at a rate of more than \$15 billion a month (or \$20 million an hour) – and that's just what the government spends on foreign wars. That does not include the cost of maintaining and staffing the 1,000-plus U.S. military bases spread around the globe. Incredibly, although the U.S. constitutes only 5 percent of the world's population, America boasts almost 50 percent of the world's total military expenditure, spending more on the military than the next 19 biggest-spending nations combined. In fact, the Pentagon spends more on war than all 50 states combined spend on health, education, welfare, and safety. Yet what most Americans fail to recognize is that these ongoing wars have little to do with keeping the country safe and everything to do with enriching the military industrial complex at taxpayer expense.

Rise of the Imperial President. During his two terms in office, George W. Bush stepped outside the boundaries of the Constitution and assembled an amazing toolbox of powers that greatly increased the authority of the executive branch and the reach of the federal government. Bush expanded presidential power to, among other things, allow government agents to secretly open the private mail of American citizens; authorize government agents to secretly, and illegally, listen in on the phone calls of American citizens and read our e-mails; assume control of the federal government following a "catastrophic event"; and declare martial law. Thus, the groundwork was laid for an imperial presidency, a state of affairs that continued after Barack Obama's ascension to the Oval Office and one that will likely not improve, no matter who wins on Election Day, unless something is done to restore the balance between government and its citizens.

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