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Commentary, analysis and investigations
on issues affecting African Americans
www.blackcommentator.com

July 9, 2009 - Issue 332

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**Obama's Tortured Democracy:
The Power of Images and the
Politics of State Secrecy
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Before the thick fog of government censorship stifled electronically mediated videos and pictures of savage state violence and repression in the streets of Tehran, one image became both a rallying point and an iconic symbol of the fierce protest movement challenging the allegedly stolen election of hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the repressive nature of the Islamic Republic founded in 1979. The "Neda video" filmed by two people holding a camera phone graphically shows in disturbing detail a 26-year-old woman, Neda Aga-Soltan, lying in a pool of blood on a Tehran street, unable to speak as her father bends over her stunned body and pleads with her to hold on. The horror of the scene revealed itself more acutely with the juxtaposed images of a once vibrant Neda smiling serenely into the camera - as if she were gently seeking the viewer's gaze and asking for justice. She died as a result of being shot in the chest by a plainclothes member of the Basij militia. The now deceased victim whose blood-streaked face is captured on video communicates powerfully not just the needless suffering and death of an innocent woman, but also the brutality and harsh violence of state-sponsored repression. In spite of the seriousness of the crime and the global indignation it has produced, the Iranian government thus far has refused to launch an investigation of Neda's death and banned any public funerals or memorials. As Glen Greenwald rightly insists, "Like so many iconic visual images before it - from My Lai, fire hoses and dogs unleashed at civil rights protesters, Abu Ghraib - that single image has done more than the tens of thousands of words to dramatize the violence and underscore the brutality of the state response."^[1] The image of Neda's death has kindled a global tsunami of moral outrage, turning her into both a coveted

icon of collective resistance to state violence and a symbol of struggle for the promise of a future Islamic democracy. Indeed, given the concerted efforts by technophiles the world over, the event crystalized, for a moment, the emerging possibilities of new forms of global citizenship.

The dramatic Neda video reconfigured the ways in which an oppressive government attempted to define the boundaries of the possible, and the ways in which new spaces and modes of criticism came to exist nonetheless, no longer contained by official hierarchies of power and control. The image of Neda's death ruptured the circuit of dominant power and official knowledge that made anti-democratic policies acceptable, producing an outpouring of public anger while providing evidence of a state-supported atrocity and government repression that revealed and challenged the carefully managed way in which the Iranian government framed its perception of itself and its attempts to educate the wider society. For a moment, social and state power were made accountable in novel ways, held up to critical scrutiny, and challenged with a massive discharge of anguish and protests among students, intellectuals, and a variety of other groups. The Neda video has now become an inseparable part of a historic legacy of images that have served to modify the nature of politics and government abuse by both making power visible and loosening the coordinates of government-sanctioned ways of seeing and knowing. Or, as the French philosopher Jacques Rancière puts it in a different context, the video functions "to modify the visible, the ways of experiencing and perceiving the tolerable as intolerable."[\[2\]](#)

The political importance of the power of the image to reveal government abuse and unleash public outrage was almost lost on members of the American media establishment when President Obama was asked by CNN's Suzanne Malveaux about his reaction to the Neda video. Obama responded by calling the image "heartbreaking," adding that "anybody who sees it knows that there's something fundamentally unjust about that." He then offered some support, however oblique, to those protesting Iran's contested election by quoting Dr. Martin Luther King's expression "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."[\[3\]](#) Fortunately, Helen Thomas, one of the more courageous reporters covering the White House refused to accept his answer as a humble expression of grief and interrupted him with the question of how he might reconcile his positive statements about the Neda video and images of Iranians protesting in the streets of Tehran with his concerted attempts to block the release of photos of detainees abused and tortured abroad by the United States. Obama responded by suggesting that Thomas' question was out of line - in actuality, she was focusing on a contradiction that would seem to connect Obama more to the forces of government suppression and censorship than to those sympathetic to the ideals of freedom and government transparency. As Randy Cohen wrote in the *New York Times*, "We should not rebuke Iran for lack of openness and then resist it ourselves."[\[4\]](#) Glenn Greenwald further heightened the contradiction by asking "how is it possible for Obama to pay dramatic tribute to the 'heartbreaking' impact of that Neda video in bringing to light the injustices of the Iranian Government's conduct while simultaneously suppressing images that do the same with regard to our own Government's conduct?"[\[5\]](#)

Obama publicly acknowledges the suffering of this young girl but refuses to acknowledge or respond to the suffering and pain of those countless detainees tortured by U.S. military and intelligence forces. In Obama's contradictory logic, the life of Neda

Agha-Soltan is eminently grievable, but not the lives of those who have survived being murdered only to endure horrible abuses at the hands of U.S. government employees, some of whom have most certainly committed war crimes. At the same time, Obama's invocation of the state secrecy privilege in refusing to release images of torture and abuse represents an attempt on the part of the Obama administration to ratify what kinds of government actions can be made visible and open to debate and what practices should be hidden from public purview, even if the government is guilty of war crimes. State secrecy operating in the service of abuse has more in common with dictatorships reminiscent of Pinochet's Argentina, with its infamous torture chambers and willingness to "disappear" all those considered enemies of the state than it does with a vibrant and open democracy. Such secrecy shuts down public debate, makes the policies of governments invisible, and implies that state power should not be held accountable. But it does more. It sanctions criminal behavior, undermines the need for public dialogue, contaminates moral values, and furthers a culture of violence and cruelty by suggesting that those who criminally promote torture, break the law, and engage in human rights violations should not be held responsible for their actions.

Obama and his defenders argue that releasing the inflammatory torture photos would reflect badly on the United States, increasing both anti-American sentiment around the world and putting the lives of American troops in jeopardy. According to Obama, "The publication of these photos would not add any additional benefit to our understanding of what was carried out in the past by a small number of individuals. ... In fact, the most direct consequence of releasing them, I believe, would be to further inflame anti-American opinion and to put our troops in danger."[\[6\]](#) In this view, the legal framework for ensuring government transparency should be abandoned in order to protect American idealism against what might be perceived as its sordid reality. The utter weakness of this position has been cogently exposed by Greenwald. He writes:

Think about what Obama's rationale would justify. Obama's claim - that release of the photographs "would be to further inflame anti-American opinion and to put our troops in greater danger" - means we should conceal or even outright lie about all the bad things we do that might reflect poorly on us. For instance, if an Obama bombing raid slaughters civilians in Afghanistan (as has happened several times already), then, by this reasoning, we ought to lie about what happened and conceal the evidence depicting what was done - as the Bush administration did - because release of such evidence "would be to further inflame anti-American opinion and to put our troops in greater danger."[\[7\]](#)

Indeed, according to this logic, the best way to deal with criminal behavior on the part of the American government is to suppress any evidence that it happened. Clearly, not only does this position shield executive wrongdoing on the part of the Bush administration, the CIA, and the national intelligence agencies, but it also empties history of any critical meaning and ethical substance. How would history be written according to this logic? Would it seem reasonable in order to promote a sanitized view of history to eliminate images from textbooks and public view that record atrocities such as the lynchings of African-Americans? When acts of state torture take place in prisons against people of color, should we disavow such criminal acts on the grounds that they would discredit America's image in the world? Would it be deemed patriotic to prevent young people from being able to see, or study for that matter, any disturbing

image that might put into focus police brutality, the violence of the racial state, or orchestrated government terror often directed against poor whites and minorities of race and class who are often considered disposable? Should we rewrite the narrative of U.S. policies and politics so as to cleanse it of human suffering in order to promote a cheerful Disney-like image of American society, while simultaneously disclaiming any responsibility toward the other? In spite of Obama's support of the state-secrets privilege, the task of history is not to bury dangerous memories but to draw out the darkness embedded in the recesses of the past, to make clear that the cover of secrecy and silence will not protect those who violate the law, and to reject a notion of national amnesia that sanctions illegality in the name of progress. But this is more than the task of history: it is also an obligation of democratic leadership and governance. What we need is public disclosure and a mode of government transparency that reveal that the United States has a long history of torture that extends from the genocide of Native Americans to slavery to the killing of 21,000 Vietnamese under the aegis of the CIA's infamous Phoenix Program. The purpose of this history is not to induce shame but to recognize that such crimes were legitimated by a set of political conditions and institutionalized policies that must be excised from American domestic and foreign policies if we would hope for a future that does not simply repeat the past.

Obama's claim that the United States no longer practices torture implies that a change in policy should coincide with the erasure of the history in which such crimes were committed, thus invoking the need to move on and to practice government censorship as part of the process. Many commentators have rightly argued that Obama's refusal to release the photos of abuse and torture as well as to prosecute officials who legitimated and practiced such abuses violates both the law and the public's right to know and stands in violation of the most basic and elemental precepts of human rights. These commentators are right, but what is often left out of their arguments is that historical awareness is the precondition for not only arousing a sense of moral and legal responsibility but also understanding how we came to the conditions and forces that led to such horrors in the first place. Put differently, such images and other dangerous forms of memory serve a vital civic and educational value. They create the possibility for rethinking both government policies and how a society views itself - as when the horrific images of torture that emerged from Abu Ghraib powerfully revealed and set in motion a public debate based on the recognition that the "United States had transformed itself from a country that, officially at least, condemned torture to a country that practised it."[\[8\]](#) But such images, memories, and forms of historical evidence also create the conditions for civic engagement. If the disturbing images from the torture chambers of Abu Ghraib had been suppressed, the public would never have learned about the moral and political abuse sanctioned at the highest levels of government, Bush's secret CIA prisons, or the willingness of government lawyers to provide a legal cover for a range of practices considered torture by the United Nations, the Geneva Accords, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and most human rights organizations.

By refusing to release photos of those tortured by U.S. forces, Obama sadly continues yet another element of the Bush regime organized around an attempt to regulate the visual field, to mandate what can be seen and modify the landscape of the sensible and visible. And equally important, as Judith Butler points out, the Obama administration's application of the state-secrecy privilege grants it the power to determine "which lives count as human and as living, and which do not."[\[9\]](#) At a time in history when the

American public is overly subject to the quasi- militarization of everyday life, endlessly exposed to mass-produced spectacles of commodified and ritualized violence, a culture of cruelty and barbarism becomes deeply entrenched and easily tolerated. More is created in this instance than a moral and affective void - a refusal to recognize and rectify the illegal and morally repugnant violence, abuse, and suffering imposed on those alleged disposable others - but also an undoing of the very fabric of any vestige of civilization and justice. The descent into barbarism can take many forms but one indication may be glimpsed when torture appears to be one of the last practices left that allow many Americans to feel alive, to mark what it means to be close to the register of death in a way that reminds them of the ability to feel within a culture that deadens every possibility of life. How else to explain that 49% of the American public "consider torture justified at least some of the time [and] fully 71% refuse to rule it out entirely"[10] Clearly, such a culture is in dire need of being condemned, unlearned, and transformed through modes of critical education and public debate if American democracy is to survive as more than a distant and unfulfilled promise. We have lived too long with governments that use power to promote violence, conveniently hidden behind a notion of secrecy and silence that selectively punishes those considered expendable - in its prisons, schools, or urban slums. Such secrecy privileges officially sanctioned power and makes a mockery of both citizenship and democracy itself. This practice is especially egregious coming from a U.S. president who campaigned on the need for government transparency and accountability. Government secrecy is the hallmark of authoritarian regimes, not substantive democracies, and critical citizenship does not prosper under policies that reward secrecy and ignorance rather than openness and critical dialogue. Let's hope that educators, religious leaders, young people, parents, concerned citizens and larger social movements will be alerted to the dangers of state suppression in the United States as well as Iran and mobilize to educate Obama about the appropriate limits of power and the promise of democratic leadership.

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End Notes:

[1]. Glenn Greenwald, "The Neda Video, Torture, and the Truth-Revealing Power of Images," *Salon.com* (June 24, 2009), <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2009/06/24-10>.

[2]. Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, "Art of the Possible: An Interview with Jacques

Rancière," *Artforum* (March 2007), pp. 259-260.

[3]. Tabassum Zakaria, "Obama Calls Neda Video 'Heartbreaking,'" *Reuters Blogs: Front Row* (June 23, 2009), <http://blogs.reuters.com/frontrow/tag/barack-obama-iran-protests-neda/>.

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[5]. Glenn Greenwald, "The Neda Video, Torture, and the Truth-Revealing Power of Images," *Salon.com* (June 24, 2009), <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2009/06/24-10>.

[6]. Scott Wilson, "Obama Shifts on Abuse Photos," *Washington Post* (May 14, 2009). Online: <http://mobile.washingtonpost.com/detail.jsp?key=387026&rc=wo&npc=wo>.

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
[8]. Mark Danner, "US Torture: Voices from the Black Sites," *New York Review of Books* (April 9, 2009), p. 77.


[9]. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), p.74.

[10]. Roy Eidelson, "How Americans Think About Torture - and Why", *TruthOut.com*, (May 11, 2009). Online at: <http://www.truthout.org/051209C>.

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