

Orange alert in US—terrorizing the American public again

By Bill Vann
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For the first time in six months, the Bush administration has raised its “terrorist attacks threat advisory” from elevated, or “Code Yellow”—its default status—to high, or “Code Orange.”

The action combines the ominous with the ridiculous. It immediately translates into heavily armed troops and specialized police patrolling US airports, train stations, government buildings, the Wall Street stock exchange in New York City, bridges, tunnels and other sites. Missile batteries are deployed near the White House and F-16s are scrambled for round-the-clock combat patrols over New York and Washington.

Foreign visitors to the US are subjected to intense scrutiny and some are turned back for no justifiable reason, while immigrants residing in the US are once again threatened with arbitrary interrogations and arrests.

President Bush, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge and other officials feed the public a mixture of panic and placidity, warning on the one hand that terrorists may be preparing an attack even worse than those of September 11, 2001, while urging, on the other, that everyone go about his normal holiday plans. The effort seems designed to terrorize the public without unduly affecting the already depleted profit margins of the retail and airline industries.

“Information indicates that terrorists abroad are anticipating near-term attacks that they believe will rival, or exceed, the attacks in New York [and] at the Pentagon,” declared Ridge Monday, adding shortly thereafter, “Gather with your family and friends.... We will show the terrorists this holiday season both our goodwill toward our fellow men, and our readiness and resolve to protect our families.”

Typical of all such elevated alerts, Ridge declared that the government was “very concerned” about reports of a possible female suicide bomber preparing an attack in New York City, and then said the authorities had no “independent confirmation” that there was any substance to the reports.

Ridge’s justification for the raised threat level at a Monday news conference bordered on the incoherent. Asked to square the supposedly heightened danger of an attack on the scale of 9/11 with the Bush administration’s claims that it has “decapitated” the Al Qaeda terrorist network, Ridge responded: “But make no mistake about it, the president has said this is—we have to be into this—we are in this for the long term, that in spite of the extraordinary success of the military and the CIA, the cooperation with our allies, the apprehension or death of a lot of the principals and the freezing the assets, this is still an international war,

international terrorist cells including Al Qaeda, and the fact that we are picking up information that results in us going to Orange, I think, is a reflection of increased capacity, probably on our side, not necessarily greater ability on theirs.”

Most striking of all is the media’s reaction to the raising of the terrorism alert. Both the broadcast news networks and the major US dailies have marched in lockstep with the administration’s terror scare, treating the change in the color-coded alert system with less critical objectivity than they would a weather forecast.

Press reports have accepted at face value the Bush administration’s claims—entirely unsubstantiated—that the US is facing catastrophic attacks, while engaging in civic boosterism, replete with upbeat reports about Americans confronted with disaster “taking it in their stride” and going about their holiday merriment.

The *Washington Post* published an editorial Tuesday entitled simply “Orange Alert” that praised Ridge for “doing a much better job of giving details about the nature and source of the threat” than on three previous occasions this year when the Bush administration announced the raising of the threat level. “Mr. Ridge was right to give out as many details as possible,” the editorial continued. “Naming times and places gives law enforcement personnel as well as ordinary people a clearer sense of what they ought to be doing.”

One is tempted to ask: what planet are the *Post* editors living on? No verifiable information has been given to justify the elevated alert. Indeed, an FBI alert issued on the eve of the Homeland Security announcement declared, “[W]e have no information on the possible operatives, target, timing or method of a possible attack.”

By all accounts, the latest Orange alert has triggered essentially the same response as the earlier ones—a massive, nationwide mobilization of military and police power at the estimated cost of over \$1 billion a week. Nor is there any clear end in sight, with government officials indicating that the heightened security may be kept in place well into the new year.

For all of the media “experts” chattering about Al Qaeda’s supposed motives and methods, what is left totally unexamined is the political context of the alert, not to mention the motives and methods of the Bush administration itself.

The previous round of Orange alert announcements—three in the space of just four months—took place in the context of the run-up to and launching of the unprovoked US war against Iraq. One of

them was issued on the very eve of worldwide demonstrations against the war that brought more than 10 million people into the streets in cities across the globe. The transparent political motive underlying the raising of the terrorist alarm was to intimidate this mass opposition to US military aggression.

This latest attempt to terrorize the American public follows a series of events that have called into question key aspects of the Bush administration's so-called war on terrorism.

Rulings by two separate federal appellate courts last week challenged the Bush administration's arrogation of powers to seize and hold indefinitely without charges or trial both foreign nationals and US citizens based solely on the president's designation of these individuals as "enemy combatants."

The administration has claimed the right to do whatever it wants with these detainees, who become the equivalent of "disappeared" persons, with no rights whatsoever. Indeed, in a case heard by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals on the West Coast dealing with the 650 prisoners held incommunicado at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba, the government said that it would insist on such unfettered power, even it were charged that it was "engaging in acts of torture or that it was summarily executing the detainees."

Meanwhile, the head of the independent panel established to investigate September 11 issued a statement that the terrorist attacks were "something that did not have to happen." Thomas Kean, the former New Jersey Republican governor tapped to head the commission, added a comment that appeared to indict the Bush administration for its refusal to hold anyone accountable for failing to prevent the attacks. "There are people that, if I was doing the job, would certainly not be in the position they were in at that time because they failed; they simply failed," said Kean.

Despite the administration's secrecy and refusal to cooperate with the panel, its limited investigation has already exposed as a lie the claim by National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice—echoed by other top officials—that no one "could have predicted that they would try to use a ... hijacked airplane as a missile." In fact, there were multiple warnings over years about such attacks, as well as specific warnings of an impending Al Qaeda operation in the weeks preceding September 11.

Rice, Bush, Vice President Cheney and other administration officials still face the prospect of being called before the panel as witnesses. According to *Time* magazine, Rice is battling with the commission "because she does not want to testify under oath or, according to one source, in public."

A series of investigative reports in recent weeks have also exposed the administration's gross inflation of both the terrorist threat and its own claims of success in thwarting alleged plots. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* reported December 21 that a list of 280 "terrorism-related" cases cited by the US Justice Department as evidence of its victories in the war on terrorism consisted in large part of hapless immigrants who were swept up in the government's dragnet, found to have no ties to terrorism and charged with minor offenses. Similarly, a study done at Syracuse University demonstrated that the median sentence handed down in cases that the government tied to international terrorism was just two weeks.

The Bush administration has constantly invoked the September

11 attacks and the war on terrorism as a justification for virtually all of its policies—from the illegal war against Iraq to tax cuts for America's financial elite. To the extent that this rationale is called into question, it threatens not only these policies, but this unelected administration's grip on power.

Given this political environment, there is every reason to treat the latest terrorist warning with skepticism.

It is, at the same time, by no means excluded that a terrorist attack could be forthcoming. The policies pursued by the Bush administration in its unprovoked war against Iraq and the continuing military occupation of the country, as well as in its support for the brutal Israeli crackdown against the Palestinian people in the occupied territories, have created immense anger throughout the Middle East. These policies, pursued under the false pretext of combating terrorism, have created an ample new pool of recruits for the politically reactionary terrorist operations of radical Islamist groups.

A far more imminent and verifiable threat is the one posed to the democratic rights of the American people by a government that is intent on using terrorism as a pretext for ramming through policies that serve the interests of a tiny minority at the top of the economic ladder and repressing opposition both at home and abroad.

Significantly, an advisory panel on the US response to the threat of terrorism felt compelled to include in a report released last week a warning against "the impression that the US is establishing a kind of 'secret police.'"

If another massive terrorist attack does take place, it will happen with the last such event—more than two years ago—yet to be explained to the American people by an administration that has done all in its power to stonewall any serious investigation.

Under these conditions, it is impossible to exclude the danger that this administration—in the run-up to national elections—could escalate from unfounded terrorist warnings to actually provoking or permitting a terrorist attack to take place in order to consolidate its rule and provide the justification for new wars abroad and intensified repression at home.

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