

Terror alerts set stage for election based on fear

By Bill Van Auken and SEP presidential candidate
3 August 2004

With the declaration of “code orange” terror alerts in New York City, Washington, DC, and Newark, New Jersey, the Bush administration has set the stage for a national election in which government-inspired fear will be a principal tool in a campaign to coerce American voters.

Monday saw the deployment of black-uniformed paramilitary police armed with assault rifles outside the stock exchange and other major financial centers in New York and neighboring Newark, as well as stepped-up security at the headquarters of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in Washington. Major arteries into New York were closed to commercial traffic and trucks subjected to searches.

Are the warnings of terrorist attacks justified by genuine intelligence or are they merely a political fabrication by the Bush administration calculated to terrorize the American public? It is impossible to say, given that the information that Washington claims to have unearthed is, as always, kept secret.

US officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, claim that detailed information emerged following the arrest of an Al Qaeda operative in Pakistan the previous week. According to these officials, recovered with the captured operative was a “treasure trove” of intelligence material.

The nature of this intelligence is itself suspect, however. According to the unnamed officials, it consists of evidence that Al Qaeda supporters had cased out the financial centers in New York, Newark and Washington, but that this surveillance predated the September 11, 2001, attacks. They admitted that there was no indication that any terrorist action was imminent.

Given the record of the current administration, no warning of a terrorist attack can be taken at face value. This administration’s modus operandi has been based on lies, provocations and intimidation—from the theft of the 2000 election onwards. Yet both the media and the administration’s ostensible political opponents in the Democratic Party have treated the unverifiable intelligence claims as incontrovertible fact.

The one prominent discordant voice was that of former Democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean, who told CNN that he was “concerned that every time something happens that’s not good for President Bush, he plays this trump card, which is terrorism.” He added, “It’s just impossible to know how much of this is real and how much of this is politics, and I suspect there’s some of both.”

The comment, which expressed an opinion widely shared on the

streets of New York, Newark and Washington, provoked a storm of official outrage against the former Vermont governor. Republicans stopped just short of accusing him of treason, while Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry swiftly disassociated himself from Dean’s remarks.

Fellow Democrat and former candidate for the party’s presidential nomination, Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, called Dean’s comments “outrageous,” adding, “No one in their right mind would think the president or the secretary of homeland security would raise an alert level and scare people for political reasons.”

On the contrary, millions of perfectly sane people throughout the US know full well that this administration has already manipulated intelligence and inflated terrorist threats for political reasons. They have seen government officials seize upon the tragic events of September 11, 2001, to intimidate political opposition and justify everything from unprovoked war to tax cuts for the wealthy. They have watched the unraveling of the multiple false pretexts given for the long-planned war to conquer Iraq and its oil resources. Most prominent among these was the lie that the Iraqi regime was arming terrorists with “weapons of mass destruction” for an imminent attack that could be forestalled only by war.

There is ample reason to question the timing and validity of the latest terror scare. It came on the very eve of a White House press conference touting the administration’s partial adoption of recommendations made by the 9/11 commission for revamping the US national intelligence apparatus. Flanked by his senior cabinet ministers and the acting director of the CIA, Bush used the terror alert as a backdrop for his proposals, declaring the alert a “solemn reminder of the threat we continue to face,” and projecting a war on terrorism that would continue without foreseeable end.

The circumstances surrounding the capture of the supposed source of the fresh intelligence—Tanzanian-born Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani—suggest a politically manipulated event. There have been widespread reports that the Bush administration is using a combination of bribes and threats to convince the Pakistani regime to stage the capture of so-called “high-value targets,” senior figures in Al Qaeda or the Taliban, to coincide with the Republican National Convention and the run-up to the November election. Both Al Qaeda and the Taliban had intimate ties with the Pakistani intelligence agency, the ISI, which in turn has long functioned as a key partner of the American CIA.

Pakistani security forces arrested Ghailani on July 25. Yet the

announcement of his arrest was delayed until July 30, just hours before Kerry was to give his acceptance speech to the Democratic National Convention.

There is every reason to believe that the Bush administration is timing its warnings and announcements in the “war on terrorism” based on the crassest political considerations. The latest scare, coming in the immediate aftermath of the Democratic convention and at the outset of Kerry’s national campaign, has the effect of driving Bush’s rival out of the headlines.

Moreover, the warnings in New York serve the purpose of intimidating the mass protests that are expected in the city when the Republican National Convention begins at the end of this month, and creating a climate conducive to repressive action.

Whatever the political calculations, the fact remains that Bush and Kerry are advancing essentially the same policy in relation to the “war on terror.” Both big-business parties are advocating changes in law and the structure of law enforcement and intelligence agencies that would lay the institutional foundations for a police state.

At his White House press conference, Bush publicly adopted two of the recommendations made by the panel that investigated the September 11 attacks. The first calls for the naming of a national intelligence director, who would coordinate the activities of some 15 separate US civilian and military intelligence agencies. The second would create a national counter-terrorism center, which Bush said would constitute the “government’s knowledge bank for information about known and suspected terrorists.”

Democratic candidate Kerry also called Monday for the creation of the national intelligence director post, but chided Bush for not basing the new position in the White House and for not moving “more rapidly” to implement the changes.

Bush indicated that he expected bipartisan support for an overhaul of the National Security Act, the 57-year-old law that created the CIA and established the general parameters for US intelligence operations in the wake of the Second World War. The fundamental change that both parties advocate is the abolition of a statutory ban prohibiting the CIA and military intelligence from engaging in domestic spying and law-enforcement activities.

When it was passed in 1947, the National Security Act included a specific prohibition on the CIA exercising any “police, subpoena, or law enforcement powers or internal security functions.” The language was introduced in the face of widespread warnings from both Democrats and Republicans, as well as the press, that the new CIA could become an “American Gestapo”—a secret spy agency conducting domestic operations against political dissent.

This is precisely what is now being prepared, with the full support of Kerry and the Democrats, who continuously criticize Bush for not moving with sufficient “urgency” in implementing this far-reaching escalation of the state’s repressive powers. No significant questioning of—much less outright opposition to—this sweeping change has been raised within either party or by the media. Instead, Democratic and Republican politicians alike, together with the major news outlets, promote the concept of a never-ending war on terrorism and urge people to go about their daily business while ignoring the wholesale attacks on their civil

liberties.

Certainly, a terrorist attack cannot be ruled out. The US war in Iraq, combined with bipartisan support for Israel’s ruthless attacks on the Palestinians in the occupied territories, has generated immense popular anger throughout the Middle East, some of which may be channeled into the retrograde politics of terror.

Yet, under the present political conditions in the US, the Bush administration itself, or elements within the state intelligence apparatus, would be among the prime suspects in any new terrorist action. Just as the September 11 attacks provided this administration with the pretext for initiating its long-planned seizure of Iraq, so a new terrorist act would be seized upon as the justification for fresh military adventures abroad and dictatorial actions at home. Already within the administration there have been discussions on canceling the 2004 election in the event of such an attack.

In the final analysis, this turn toward police state measures is bound up with the immense and uninterrupted growth of social inequality within the US over the past three decades. The gulf dividing the fabulously wealthy top 1 percent that controls both major parties and the hundreds of millions of struggling working people has become so great that a genuinely democratic solution to any significant social question has become impossible.

The defense of democratic rights and the eradication of the threat of war and terrorism are possible only through a break with the two-party system. It requires the independent political mobilization of working people based upon a socialist and internationalist program that directly challenges the immense concentration of private wealth, while seeking to unite the struggles of American workers with those of working people in the Middle East and internationally.

The Socialist Equality Party is running in the 2004 election to advance such a program and to lay the foundations for the emergence of such a mass independent movement.

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