

Bush administration moves to silence dissent

By Jerry White
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The Bush administration is employing government censorship and intimidation to suppress criticism of its war drive and attacks on civil liberties.

At a news briefing Wednesday, White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer denounced comments made by Bill Maher, the host of ABC-TV's "Politically Incorrect" program, and warned that all Americans had to "watch what they say and watch what they do."

Fleischer's attack concerned remarks made by Maher on his late-night talk show September 17. Maher disagreed with Bush's assertion that the hijackers were cowards and said, "We have been the cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, it's not cowardly."

These comments prompted a campaign, initiated by a right-wing talk show host in Houston, to denounce Maher—who describes himself as a libertarian—as unpatriotic. Shortly afterwards, corporate sponsors Sears and FedEx removed their ads, an ABC affiliate in Washington, DC temporarily dropped the show, and Michael Eisner, the chairman of ABC's corporate parent, Walt Disney, criticized Maher, who subsequently made a public apology.

Fleischer's threats against Maher generated protests from free speech advocates. In response, the Bush administration attempted to cover its tracks. When the White House released its official transcript of the press briefing, the portion of Fleischer's comments warning Americans to "watch what they say," were deleted. When the Washington press corps mildly criticized this deception, the administration admitted that Fleischer's comments had been altered, but claimed it was a transcription error.

Rep. W.J. "Billy" Tauzin, a Louisiana Republican who had once appeared on Maher's show, grudgingly acknowledged that Maher had First Amendment rights. He said his committee, which oversees the broadcast industry, had reviewed show transcripts and concluded that "Bill's safe." But a top aide added ominously, "We don't intend to launch any cruise missiles at him from 2,000 miles away."

The White House denunciation of Maher was not the only effort to silence criticism of the administration's policies. Another episode took place on Monday, September 24 at a House Judiciary Committee hearing, where Attorney General John Ashcroft testified in favor the administration's "anti-terrorism" bill that provides for sweeping attacks on civil liberties, including increased police powers to wiretap, search private homes and businesses and seize their contents, and spy on electronic and Internet communications. The administration bill also gives the attorney general the power to declare non-citizens terrorist suspects and hold them indefinitely, without any provision for judicial review of the attorney general's actions.

After Ashcroft finished speaking, committee Democrats called on free speech and civil liberties advocates to testify, including representatives of the American Civil Liberties Union and People for the American Way, who have criticized many of the administration's proposals as violations of basic constitutional safeguards.

At that point the judiciary committee's Republican staff ordered

camera crews to leave, including those of C-SPAN, the public interest network that broadcasts congressional proceedings on cable television. While the print media and the general public were allowed to remain, the staff made sure that the American people would not be able to see and hear those who are warning about the government's attack on democratic rights.

The action was in clear violation of the House of Representatives' own rules, which state, "Whenever a hearing or meeting conducted by a committee or subcommittee is open to the public, those proceedings shall be open to coverage by audio and visual means."

The Bush administration has also sought to crack down on media broadcasts that might raise questions about its planned military operations against Afghanistan. Earlier this week State Department spokesman Richard Boucher criticized Voice of America radio—a propaganda arm of the government—for defying the department and broadcasting a report based on its interview with the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar.

At a press conference on Wednesday Boucher said, "I'm not writing their news stories for them. I think, considering the fact that US taxpayers pay for this, considering the fact that this is the Voice of America, we don't think that the head of the Taliban belongs on this radio station."

In addition to these overt attacks on press freedom and political speech, Bush's moves to seize the assets of businesses allegedly supporting terrorists have led to the shutting down of radio stations and web sites, including those which provide information about political conflicts in Northern Ireland, Latin America and elsewhere. According to a news alert issued by WBAI Radio, the listener-supported station in New York City, the government's measures have resulted in the silencing of Radio Free Eireann, a program that has covered developments in Northern Ireland for 20 years, carrying interviews with such guests as Bernadette Sands, the sister of Irish Republican Army hunger striker Bobby Sands, Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, and representatives of Sinn Fein.

Radio Free Eireann is broadcast weekly by WBAI, but it has been forced to shut down because the web site that archives all of its programs—Iradio.com—has been taken down. This occurred after the web service provider was threatened with seizure of its assets if it continued to host "terrorist" radio programs. Travis E. Towle, the founder and CEO of Cosmic Entertainment Company, which produces Iradio.com, was told by his Internet service provider, Hypervine, that it had been "strongly advised" to take the web site down.

A Hypervine representative read Mr. Towle a statement that, under an Executive Order signed by President Bush, the newly created Office of Homeland Security can seize all assets "without any notice ... of any company or person that helps, supports, or does anything that can be called or labeled terrorism, or is found to be connected to terrorism in any way..."

These threats have also caused Cosmic Entertainment to close the web sites archiving two other WBAI radio programs, "Our Americas" and "Grandpa Al Lewis Live." "Our America" is a news magazine covering Latin America. "Grandpa Al Lewis Live" features commentary by the actor who starred in "The Munsters" and "Car 54 Where are You?"