

Bush's war at home: government censorship, secrecy, and lies

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The month since the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington has seen dramatic changes in the day-to-day functioning of the US government and the open emergence of powerful tendencies toward antidemocratic and dictatorial methods of rule.

The Bush administration has sought to impose greater secrecy than that which prevailed during World War II, pressured the media to censor coverage of opponents and targets of the war drive in Central Asia, and engaged in arbitrary arrests and detentions without trial on a scale not seen in America for more than 80 years.

The Democratic Party has been a willing partner in this onslaught on democratic rights. Last week the House Judiciary Committee voted 36-0 for a package of repressive measures sought by the Bush administration in the name of combating terrorism. The Senate approved a similar bill by 96-1 on October 11, and final passage by both houses is expected in the coming week.

The House bill significantly expands the power of the FBI to spy on wireless telephone calls and the Internet, to circulate the information obtained to other government agencies, and to detain immigrants on the orders of the attorney general, all without court review.

The Senate approved its version of the anti-terrorism bill after a series of overwhelming votes to defeat amendments introduced by Senator Russell Feingold of Wisconsin, the lone dissenter on the legislation. Feingold said the measure would authorize FBI surveillance of vast areas of American life that have no conceivable relation to the September 11 terrorist attacks.

One provision authorizes FBI surveillance of Internet usage by anyone who accesses a computer "without authorization." The language is so broad that it would apply to any employee who uses a company or government computer to make an Internet purchase, or a teenager who uses a library computer to visit an unapproved site.

The Senate bill represents the effective militarization of the FBI and other federal police agencies. As Intelligence Committee Chairman Bob Graham, a Florida Democrat, declared, "If there is a single goal of the intelligence components of this anti-terrorism bill, it is to change the focus from responding to acts that have already occurred to preventing acts that threaten the lives of American citizens. We cannot continue to use critical information only in a criminal trial." In practice, this means these agencies will no longer be engaged in "law enforcement," as conventionally defined, but will act as arms of the Pentagon in the "war on terrorism."

Both pieces of legislation bear Orwellian titles. The Senate bill is the "Uniting and Strengthening America Act" (USA), while the House bill, named the "Provide Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001," was so labeled because the acronym is "PATRIOT."

Both bills define terrorism so broadly that those engaging in many forms of peaceful political activity, including picketing and civil disobedience, could be targeted for electronic surveillance, Internet spying, indefinite detention and secret court proceedings.

What the new anti-terror powers of the federal government will look

like in practice can be judged by the experience of thousands of Arab-Americans and Muslim people over the past month. More than 600 people have been arrested or detained by the FBI and other police agencies, under conditions of a systematic denial of civil liberties.

Only a handful of those arrested or detained have obtained legal counsel, an indication that these prisoners have either not been informed they have the right to a lawyer or have simply been denied the exercise of this right. One lawyer, Mitchell Gray, described to the *Washington Post* a Catch-22 situation in which federal jailers demanded that he present an authorization form, signed by his client.

"I talked to the INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] several times, and nobody would tell me where he was," said Gray. "They said, 'Do you have a G-28 signed by this man? We can't let you see him without a G-28.' Well, how can I get a G-28 signed unless I see him?"

Police officials have kept virtually all information about those arrested under seal. Only a few names have been released, and families are not being told where the prisoners are being held or what charges have been lodged against them, if any. One fact is clear: not a single one of the more than 600 has been charged with any offense tied to the September 11 suicide hijackings. Most are being held on technical violations of immigration law or traffic charges that would never have led to jail time before the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

With a series of vague and ominous warnings about further terrorist attacks, the Bush administration is seeking to create a popular hysteria to support, not only short-term repressive measures, but the creation of an entirely new institutional framework for targeting domestic political opponents of American military intervention in Central Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere.

The newly established White House Office of Homeland Security is to be one focal point of this police-state buildup. By installing Governor Ridge as a White House aide, Bush bypassed Congress entirely—there will be no Senate confirmation of the appointment and no congressional oversight of his activities.

At the same time, the Pentagon has been instructed to create, for the first time in US history, an office of Commander-in-Chief USA, a headquarters for controlling all military operations in the western hemisphere, focusing on the continental United States. This would integrate four existing military commands, including the Southern Command, responsible for Latin American operations and notorious for fomenting of military coups, and the Strategic Command, which controls US nuclear forces.

The political implications of this military reorganization were spelled out by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, who told a congressional committee last week that he favors reexamination of the legal doctrine of *posse comitatus*, adopted after the American Civil War, which bars the use of the armed forces for domestic policing.

Already the Bush administration has approved the stationing of National Guard troops at airports—a measure that does little to increase the security of air travel, but accustoms the general public to armed soldiers as an

everyday sight. The next step will be the deployment of regular military forces in domestic operations for the first time in more than a century.

These moves are not merely in response to the September 11 attack. They were worked out as part of the Pentagon's Quadrennial Defense Review, a long-term planning effort on which Wolfowitz and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have focused since they took office early this year. This underscores the fact that the Bush administration has seized on the terrorist attack to bring forward an anti-democratic political agenda of long standing.

An integral part of the buildup of repressive forces is the curbing and disciplining of the press. Bush press secretary Ari Fleischer gave the signal with his well-publicized declaration that Americans should "watch what they say" about US military, intelligence and police operations. The White House campaign to whip the press into line has met little or no resistance from the giant corporations that control the television networks and daily newspapers.

In comments reported by the *New York Times* October 7, Fleischer claimed that the public was up in arms, not over excessive government secrecy, but over undue inquisitiveness by the press. "It's not what government officials are saying that's the issue," he said. "It's the type of questions that reporters are asking that's the issue. The press is asking a lot of questions that I suspect the American people would prefer not to be asked, or answered."

On October 10 National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice held a conference call with executives of the five networks to urge them not to broadcast taped statements produced by Osama bin Laden, or to air them only in heavily censored form. Rice told them that airing propaganda by bin Laden would undermine the US war effort, while other White House officials claimed that the tapes might contain coded messages to terrorist cells.

Both the political and the military arguments for this act of self-censorship are absurd. No one can claim that the tape-recorded comments of bin Laden, hailing the destruction of the World Trade Center and the killing of more than 5,000 innocent people, will arouse any significant political support in the American viewing audience. As for the suggestion of coded messages, US television censorship would have no effect. Anyone interested in receiving such messages can get bin Laden's statements on the Internet and through the broadcasts of Arabic-language and other overseas media.

When a member of the White House press corps asked Fleischer if there was any evidence to back up the claim that the tapes might contain coded messages, Bush's press spokesman admitted that the supposed threat was based on mere "suspicions."

On Thursday morning, October 11, executives of the five networks issued a joint decision essentially capitulating to the government demand. One network executive told the *New York Times* that the action, the first time in the history of the television medium that all the networks agreed to a common limit on news coverage, was a "patriotic" decision. A CNN official said the all-news network would "consider guidance from appropriate authorities" in deciding what news to broadcast about the war.

There have been a number of previous acts of self-censorship:

* Knight-Ridder refused to publish a report—later made public by *USA Today*—that US special forces were on the ground in Afghanistan well before the start of the bombing campaign. The newspaper chain acceded to a Pentagon request to withhold the information from the American people, even though it was no secret to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

* In response to phone calls from Fleischer, officials at all five television networks, as well as the wire services, agreed to stop reporting in advance on the schedule and appointments of Bush and Cheney, on security grounds.

* Some 17 US news organizations had advance knowledge of the beginning of bombing raids on October 7, and all agreed to withhold any

reports until after the strikes began.

* The entire US media has agreed not to use the names of military personnel engaged in combat missions, including sailors on board ships in the Arabian Sea, 2,000 miles from Afghanistan. This has nothing to do with preserving operational secrecy or protecting soldiers from terrorist retaliation, since commanding officers are named and freely quoted. Rather it serves to distance the American public from the ordinary soldiers, sailors and airmen, to lessen the effect of the expected battlefield casualties.

* The media has for the most part placidly accepted the refusal of the Pentagon to provide any description of bomb damage or casualties in Afghanistan. This follows the precedent of the Persian Gulf War, where the US never made an estimate of Iraqi losses, believed to have numbered in the tens of thousands.

These measures add up to a systematic effort to block any expression of opposition to the US military intervention, and to accustom the media and the American public to more overt measures of government censorship.

The Bush administration is seeking to withhold information, not only from the public at large, but also from Congress. On October 5, Bush instructed the entire national security apparatus to limit classified briefings to only eight of the 535 members of Congress—the Senate majority and minority leaders, the House speaker and minority leader, and the chairman and ranking member of the House and Senate Intelligence committees.

White House aides said congressmen were guilty of leaking classified information from a briefing by Attorney General John Ashcroft, who told them there was "100 percent likelihood" of further terrorist attacks on US targets. Ashcroft had made similar statements in television interviews during the week, but that did not stop the administration from using the reports on the congressional briefing as a pretext to halt further disclosures. Bush virtually accused congressmen of treason, declaring, "I want Congress to hear loud and clear, it is unacceptable behavior to leak classified information when we have troops at risk."

The Bush administration only agreed to less sweeping restrictions on the dissemination of classified information after Republican members joined Democrats in opposition, citing the legal obligation of the executive branch to be accountable to the legislature for its administration of laws and handling of appropriated funds.

One of the most sinister features of the new regime is the virtual disappearance from public view of Vice President Dick Cheney, who was said to have been removed to "a secure location" on October 7, when US bombing raids on Afghanistan began.

The following day Cheney did not appear at the ceremony swearing in Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge as the director of the new Office of Homeland Security, held in the White House East Room. Cheney had been scheduled to officiate, but Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas substituted for him.

The vice president was evacuated from his official residence, and he reportedly participates in daily meetings of the National Security Council by secure videoconference, rather than in person. By Friday, October 12, Cheney had not been seen in Washington for six days.

This is especially significant given Cheney's prominence in the Bush administration. The vice president has been described as playing the role of CEO to Bush's chairman of the board. He is the man in charge of day-to-day operations, and a particularly influential figure in national security issues, given his history as secretary of defense during the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91.

When Cheney was absent from the usual vice presidential position, seated behind the president on the speaker's rostrum, during Bush's nationally televised speech to Congress September 20, White House officials declared that he had been sent elsewhere because of the security threat facing the government.

Some press reports have suggested that Bush political aides sought to

lower Cheney's profile out of concern that his greater experience in foreign policy, and more serious demeanor, might prove an embarrassing contrast to Bush. But much more than symbolism or petty jealousy are involved in Cheney's disappearance. By removing him from view, the Bush administration is shielding its chief decision-maker from any public scrutiny or accountability. Cheney heads what is, in effect, a secret branch of government.

In attacking Afghanistan, the United States is positioning itself in one of the most strategically critical and resource-rich regions of the world, Central Asia. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, American imperialism had virtually no access to this region. In the decade since the dissolution of the USSR, the Pentagon, CIA and State Department, and the giant oil companies whose interests they protect, have moved in aggressively. The mass murder at the World Trade Center became the pretext for the unfolding of a long-planned and long-prepared military intervention in the region.

In a similar fashion, the domestic side of the Bush administration's war represents the culmination of a protracted assault on constitutional principles and democratic procedures in America. Throughout the 1990s, the Republican Party, increasingly dominated by extreme right-wing elements, laid siege to the Clinton administration, using fabricated charges and bogus investigations in an attempt to bring down his administration.

This campaign produced the impeachment of an elected president for the first time in American history, and though it ultimately failed to remove Clinton from office, it revealed the impotence and paralysis of the Democratic Party. The impeachment drive created the conditions for a fundamental breach with democratic processes in the theft of the 2000 presidential election, in which the US Supreme Court intervened to halt vote-counting in Florida and installed George W. Bush in the White House.

A man who was elevated to the presidency despite losing the popular vote is now leading the American people into a war of unknown dimensions and duration, and claiming that this war, allegedly for "freedom and democracy," requires the suppression of basic democratic rights at home.



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