

Bush's war at home: a creeping coup d'état

WSWS Editorial Board

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In the period since the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the United States has undergone a radical transformation in the structure of the government, in the relationship between the people and the police and armed forces, and in the legal and constitutional framework.

The White House has assumed vast new powers for internal repression, establishing by executive order an Office of Homeland Security that is not subject to either congressional oversight or any vote on the personnel appointed to run it. An all-encompassing political police agency is coming into being, through the passage of an "anti-terror" law that effectively amalgamates the FBI and CIA and abolishes the longstanding separation between overseas spying and domestic policing.

Side by side with the bombing of Afghanistan, the Bush administration has declared that there is a second front in the war, the war at home. The federal government issues vague and unsubstantiated "terror alerts," which fuel anxiety while providing no protection to the public. Government spokesmen urge the population to get used to measures like random police searches and roadblocks as a permanent feature of life. National Guard troops patrol the airports, harbors, bridges, tunnels and even the US Capitol.

Fundamental constitutional safeguards—the right of *habeas corpus*, the right of the accused to know the charges against them, the right of arrested persons to see a lawyer, even the presumption of innocence—have been set aside for millions of immigrants from the Middle East and Central Asia. The right to privacy has been all but abolished for the entire population, with government intelligence agencies given the green light to plant bugs and wiretaps, monitor financial transactions, and conduct other forms of spying, virtually at will.

If the average American had been shown on September 10 a picture of the United States as it is today, the response would likely have been: "This is not the America I know. This looks more like a police state."

The bitter irony is that such a sweeping attack on democratic rights has been perpetrated in the name of a war to defend "freedom" and "democracy" against terrorism. But neither the Bush administration, nor its Democratic Party collaborators, nor a compliant and complicit media bother to explain the following contradiction: the United States government never secured powers such as these at any point in the twentieth century. Not in World War I, World War II or the Cold War, when the antagonists were powerful and heavily armed states, was such a radical restructuring of the governmental and legal framework carried out. Why is this happening today, when the alleged enemy is a small band of terrorists operating out of caves in one of the poorest countries in the world?

The anti-terrorism law

One of the key elements of the assault on civil liberties is the new "anti-terrorism" act, which was rushed through Congress and signed into law

only five weeks after the terror attacks. The law defines terrorism in such a way as to include political activity and speech previously protected by the Bill of Rights of the US Constitution. It provides wide-ranging authority for police agencies to carry out secret searches, conduct expanded electronic surveillance, and indefinitely detain terrorism suspects. Non-citizens, including legal permanent residents, can be denied reentry to the US for expressing political views, and can be deported for having even the most incidental association with organizations designated as "terrorist" by the government. Attorney General John Ashcroft last week expanded the number of groups so designated from 46 to 74.

Among the most ominous provisions of the law is the abolition of the "firewall" between foreign and domestic intelligence agencies. The Central Intelligence Agency now has the authority to share information with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and thereby collaborate with the FBI in conducting domestic surveillance and preparing criminal prosecutions. The FBI is likewise authorized to share with the CIA information collected during grand jury proceedings, without a court order, giving the US spy agency access to domestic intelligence it had been barred from receiving in the past.

An article in the November 4 *Washington Post* carried the ominous headline, "An Intelligence Giant in the Making: Anti-Terrorism Law Likely to Bring Domestic Apparatus of Unprecedented Scope." It noted that the media focus on the electronic surveillance and wiretapping provisions of the new legislation deflected attention from other provisions of the bill that will fundamentally alter the operation of US intelligence-gathering agencies. According to the *Post*, one of the most significant aspects of the law is that it "empowers the government to shift the primary mission of the FBI from solving crimes to gathering domestic intelligence."

The law reverses legal reforms enacted under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978, which segregated the FBI's criminal investigation function from its intelligence-gathering operations against foreign spies and international terrorists. The *Post* comments, "the bill effectively tears down legal fire walls erected 25 years ago during the Watergate era, when the nation was stunned by disclosures about presidential abuses of domestic intelligence-gathering against political activists."

These changes go beyond a mere quantitative expansion of certain investigative powers. They constitute a basic restructuring of the police and intelligence apparatus to vastly expand its scope and reach.

In recent days, federal officials have urged the lifting of legal restraints on state and local police powers. Deputy Attorney General Larry Thompson lamented that Justice Department agents "don't have enough eyes and ears" to monitor terrorist suspects, and said restrictions on local police departments "need to be looked at."

Many local police departments are already scrapping rules on intelligence-gathering that were established to protect First Amendment rights. The Los Angeles Police Commission voted last month to relax intelligence restrictions adopted in the early 1980s, following disclosures that police were monitoring anti-war protesters, liberal politicians and other political dissidents. Other big city police departments are moving to

revive the surveillance methods utilized by “Red Squad” operations of the past.

Terrorizing the public

On October 29, the government issued its second general terrorism alert in less than three weeks. Declaring that major terrorist attacks against the US or US interests around the world were in the offing, Attorney General Ashcroft was utterly vague as to the likely targets, methods or perpetrators. He provided no information to support the claim of imminent danger. He gave no instructions as to how the public was to respond to the alleged danger. However, he issued an advisory to 18,000 state and local police agencies to “continue on highest alert and to notify immediately the FBI of any unusual or suspicious activity.”

Instructing the public to accept extraordinary measures, such as random stops or searches by police or National Guard troops, or questioning by FBI agents, Ashcroft said, “We ask for the patience and cooperation of the American people, if and when they encounter additional measures undertaken by local law enforcement or federal law enforcement authorities and others who are charged with securing the safety of the public.”

As an immediate consequence of the alert, National Guard troops were deployed in a number of states at transportation centers, water supplies and nuclear power plants. These are in addition to the troops who have patrolled major airports since the September 11 events.

At week’s end, House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt announced that Congress, with bipartisan support, was authorizing the posting of armed soldiers at the Capitol building. The Supreme Court subsequently announced it would bar the public from its hearings.

The government claims that the “terror alerts” have been issued in order to warn and protect the public. But with no specific information provided about the imminent threat—when and where the terrorists might strike—what is public expected to do? Their vacuous character demonstrates that these alerts are essentially fraudulent. Their real purpose is to accustom the population to invasions of privacy, the dismantling of constitutional safeguards, and a general militarization of society. The authorities want people to accept as a normal state of affairs the deployment of armed troops at airports, public buildings, bridges, border checkpoints and in the streets.

The Bush administration has seized on the anthrax attacks as an additional means of bludgeoning the public into accepting such far-reaching restrictions on civil liberties. Although the evidence so far made available suggests that extreme right-wing elements of the Timothy McVeigh stripe are the most likely suspects, the White House and the media constantly suggest that Osama bin Laden is responsible for the anthrax attacks, depicting his Al Qaeda network as a pervasive and all-powerful threat.

Periodic alerts such as those issued October 11 and October 29 are intended to facilitate the consolidation of the new apparatus of internal repression. On October 29, the same day as the most recent alert, President Bush presided over the first meeting of the Council of Homeland Security. This new and unprecedented body includes—in addition to former Governor Tom Ridge, who has been named the director of the Office of Homeland Security—the vice president, the attorney general, the secretaries of defense, treasury, transportation and health and human services and the heads of the CIA and FBI. The powers of this council as well as those of the Office of Homeland Security are vague and undefined, and therefore virtually unlimited.

Following that meeting, Bush announced the establishment of yet

another agency with unspecified police powers—the “foreign terrorist tracking taskforce,” headed by Ashcroft. The establishment of this task force is part of a new border policy that will enable the government to more easily bar entry to immigrants alleged to have terrorist connections, and to carry out a general crackdown on those applying for or holding student visas.

Mass arrests among immigrants

These far-reaching changes come under conditions where the national security dragnet initiated after September 11 is expanding, with the number of people rounded up now standing at more than 1,100. While federal officials will not say how many of these detainees have been released, a Justice Department spokesperson said “a majority” of them are still in custody. The roundup of these individuals has been shrouded in secrecy, with the government providing no information about the detainees’ identities, where they are being held, why they are being detained, and what charges, if any, are being laid against them.

Many are held in solitary confinement. The whereabouts of some suspects are unknown to family members, and others either have no legal representation or have been denied contact with their lawyers. Much of the legal action against those in custody is taking place in secret court proceedings, with court documents sealed to the public. All of this is being done to shield the operations of federal, state and police agencies from public scrutiny.

The Justice Department has rejected appeals from civil liberties groups and some congressmen for information about the detentions, without giving any explanation for its blackout. Kate Martin, director of the Center for National Security Studies, commented that the government’s conduct in the investigation is “frighteningly close to the practice of ‘disappearing’ people in Latin America.”

Following each of the two national alerts against terrorism since September 11, the number of those rounded up by the government has risen sharply, tripling in the past few weeks. One of the main purposes of the alerts is to signal state and local police to step up their surveillance activities and round up more suspects.

While the mass murder at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon is the pretext for the mass arrests, not a single one of those detained has been charged with any offense related to the September 11 attacks. Even the Justice Department claims that at most 10 or 12 of those detained are suspected, but not proven, of having links to the hijackers. The vast majority of the arrests have another purpose, unrelated to any investigation of the terrorist attack: to intimidate the immigrant population and accustom the American people as a whole to methods previously associated with police-military dictatorships.

A “war on two fronts”

Government officials have emphasized that the anti-terror measures adopted in recent weeks should not be regarded as temporary. At a briefing on October 29, Ridge declared, “We want America to be on the highest alert. And from time to time, we may issue the same general alert again.”

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in a column in the November 1 edition of the *Washington Post*, baldly stated that not only should the American people accept an open-ended war against terrorism, but they

must “prepare now for the next war—a war that may be vastly different not only from those of the past century but also from the new war on terrorism that we are fighting today.” In other words, America is going on a war footing, not for the duration of a specific conflict in Afghanistan, but indefinitely. Consequently, the domestic police measures being taken now by the government must also be accepted as a permanent state of affairs.

One catch phrase has more and more routinely appeared in the statements of Bush administration officials: America is fighting “a war on two fronts.” Announcing his terrorism alert last week, Ashcroft stated: “I trust the American people to be able to understand in this context the conflict, where there is a front overseas and there is another front here in the United States.”

Ridge said the following day, “We are engaged in a two-front war against terrorism.” In an October 31 speech urging passage of his economic stimulus plan, Bush repeated this mantra: “For the first time in our nation’s history, part of the battle front is here at home.”

Precisely what is meant by this “war on two fronts” is never explained. But in light of the extraordinary security measures taken by the government since September 11, references to a battle on the “home front” take on a chilling significance. With their attempt to create an atmosphere of fear and hysteria over impending terrorist threats, authorities want to identify anyone rounded up in their investigation as the enemy, whether or not there is evidence against them. The same methods will be used against those who oppose the war against Afghanistan and other policies of the government, domestic or foreign.

Before and after September 11

The government’s actions in the period since September 11 constitute the most serious and sustained attack on civil liberties in US history. No one should believe that this is merely a reaction to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Such measures have long been sought by the most right-wing sections of the ruling elite, who have seized on the tragic events of September 11 to realize their political agenda at home, just as they are using them to launch a US military intervention in oil-rich Central Asia.

These sweeping changes are the culmination of two decades of political reaction and attacks on democratic rights, which have seen a steady buildup of the repressive forces of the state—two million Americans in prison, thousands on Death Row, legal restrictions on the rights of defendants, expanded powers of police spying and electronic surveillance. This has been accompanied by the emergence of a fascist-minded right wing with little popular support, but enormous influence in the Republican Party, in Congress, and now in the White House.

Those who want to claim that the recent escalation of the onslaught on civil liberties is simply a response to September 11 ignore the critical fact that the Bush administration came to power on the basis of an unprecedented assault on the most basic of democratic rights—the right to vote. The drive by Bush and the Republican Party to hijack the election and take power, despite having lost the popular vote nationally, was consummated in a ruling by the right-wing majority on the US Supreme Court, which halted a legal recount in the pivotal state of Florida, handing the presidency to Bush. A government that takes power by methods of fraud and conspiracy must rule through the same methods.

This is an administration committed to a domestic and foreign policy tailored to the interests of the wealthiest and most privileged layer in American society. It is also an administration of enormous crisis. Prior to the terror attacks, the Bush administration was showing clear signs of internal disarray. Its already narrow social base of support was eroding

under the pressure of a deepening economic slump, both in the US and globally.

The Republicans had lost control of the Senate, and on the international front, the Bush administration was increasingly isolated, with nominal allies as well as enemies opposing its aggressive and unilateralist posture. The events of September 11 were seized on by those who run the Bush administration as a welcome opportunity to shore up the government and rally public support by launching a military attack on the alleged perpetrators, while preparing for an upsurge of social struggle over rising unemployment, worsening slump and the government’s pro-corporate policies by expanding and restructuring the police powers of the state.

The Bush administration’s domestic “anti-terror” campaign must serve as a sharp warning. After the Florida debacle of November and December 2000, there were complacent commentaries in the press declaring that, unlike many other countries, the bitter political struggle in the United States did not end with tanks in the streets. Now the tanks *are* in the streets, and soldiers surround the Capitol, in what might be called a slow-motion coup d'état.

All of the traditional norms of bourgeois democracy in the US are in question. The Bush administration expresses the contempt for democracy that pervades powerful sections of the American corporate and financial oligarchy, as well as their fascist allies in the Christian right, the gun lobby and the militia movement. They are determined to go as far as they can in establishing an authoritarian regime. Such concepts as the separation of powers between the three branches of government and legislative oversight of the executive branch are being tossed aside in the effort to vastly expand the police powers of the federal executive.

It is worth noting that at the height of the anthrax scare, in mid-October, congressional Republicans favored shutting down Congress and adjourning indefinitely, the better to give Bush, the FBI, the CIA and the military a free hand, both abroad and at home.

The Bush administration’s war on democratic rights has exposed the inability of the Democratic Party to offer any serious opposition to the extreme-right forces that dominate the Republican Party. Within hours of the September 11 attacks, the Democrats pledged unconditional support to the Bush White House, declaring that political dissent was no longer permissible. The Democratic leadership not only lined up to give Bush an open-ended mandate to wage war abroad, it insured the passage of his “anti-terror” bill, suppressed any investigation of the unexplained intelligence failure that allowed the September 11 attacks to take place, and sanctioned the trashing of constitutional safeguards in the ongoing police dragnet.

The political collapse of the Democratic Party is the culmination of a protracted process of adaptation to the most right-wing sections of the ruling elite. In their craven response first to the Republican impeachment conspiracy, and then to the theft of the 2000 election, the Democrats already demonstrated their inability and unwillingness to defend democratic rights.

While for the moment, the vast majority of those caught up by the government’s dragnet are immigrants of Middle-Eastern and Central Asian descent, it is only a matter of time before these anti-democratic methods will be used more widely. The wholesale attack on democratic rights can only be halted through the independent organization of the working class, which unites all sections of the working population—immigrant and US-born—in a political struggle against the financial oligarchy and its political representatives.



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