

The New York Times and the "terror alert"

How the US media lies for Bush

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Since the September 11 events, the US media has played an indispensable role in supporting the actions of the Bush administration. The propaganda and lies doled out at White House and Pentagon press briefings are served up without criticism in the daily papers and on the nightly news, with no hint that there might be another side to the story.

Television reports from the war in Afghanistan are carefully crafted to downplay civilian casualties from air strikes, the networks fearing that accurate coverage of the death and destruction being rained on the Central Asian country and its people might undermine popular support for the US military campaign.

The media has been equally supportive of the government's initiatives at home in the "war on terrorism." The two "terror alerts" announced by Attorney General John Ashcroft have been legitimized by the press—despite the fact that no specific information has been provided to the public about when or where the terrorists might strike, or what information authorities have to back up their claims that an attack is imminent.

An editorial in the October 31 edition of the *New York Times* headlined "Life in a Time of Terror" is a telling example of the role played by the press in these events. After noting that "Americans are wondering how to respond" to the terror alert issued by Ashcroft on October 29, the *Times* writes that if the attorney general "feels that one part of that information stream looks more sinister and reliable than the rest, he is right to share it with the nation, even if people resent being frightened without getting enough specifics on which to act." Noting that "[we] are all groping our way through this new, unsteady reality as best we can," the *Times* recommends that the public accept the government's warning without question, and, by implication, all the

infringements on civil liberties that come with it.

However, the editorial then goes on to refer to a previous incident when the Bush administration "tried to sell the story that the president had avoided returning to Washington on Sept. 11 because there was a credible threat of a terrorist plot against Air Force One." White House officials subsequently stated that the Secret Service never received any communication warning of a direct threat to the president's airplane, although this admission received little attention in the press.

While acknowledging that the White House lied about the threat against the president—only using the disingenuous term "political error"—the *Times* goes on to support Ashcroft's call for the alert, uncritically accepting the claims of the administration about an imminent terrorist threat.

The *Times* points to the Air Force One incident not to discredit the administration, but as a caution to the White House to be more careful about the lies it dispenses, lest it jeopardize its "anti-terror" campaign. As the *Times* knows very well, a government capable of lying in such a flagrant manner for reasons of political expediency is eminently capable of lying about terrorist threats, or anything else for that matter. This does not prevent the *Times* from giving its imprimatur to the unprecedented assault on democratic rights that has been carried out since the terror attacks—cloaked in the guise of the "war on terrorism."

The descent of the media into an ever more servile and duplicitous arm of the state is itself a major aspect of the overall decay of democratic institutions in America, serving a key function in advancing the foreign and domestic policy initiatives of the political establishment. While the *Times* editorial concludes that in relation to the terror alerts "the nation is better off frightened and informed than left happily in dark," it

bears noting that in the period since September 11 the principal role of the press has been to parrot the government's propaganda, working to keep the American public both in a state of fear *and* darkness.



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