

The New York Times and Bush's "shadow government"

How the media covers up the threat to democratic rights

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By any standard, the front-page report in the *Washington Post* March 1 was a political bombshell. The leading newspaper in the US capital reported that the Bush administration had activated plans for a "shadow government," drawn up under the threat of nuclear war with the Soviet Union, to prepare for a possible nuclear terrorist attack on Washington DC.

Hundreds of US officials were spending time in fortified bunkers in mountainous areas of the East Coast, serving 90-day rotations while they held themselves ready to assume the full powers of the government in the event that Washington was destroyed.

The most significant aspect of this plan was that the secret government-in-waiting consisted entirely of executive branch officials. No officials of the legislative or judicial branches were included, and neither the elected party leaders in Congress nor those in the constitutional line of succession to the presidency were even aware of the program's existence. Leading congressional Democrats complained of being kept in the dark, and the issue was raised prominently in the weekend television interview programs.

But one notable quarter in the media displayed little interest in the issue. The *New York Times*, the most influential daily newspaper in America, for decades the principal press representative of liberal public opinion, gave only the most perfunctory attention to the shadow government. Its first news article merely echoed the *Post*'s account. A small follow-up article dismissed the administration's action as the activation of a longstanding Cold War contingency plan that had no particular significance.

Those were the sole articles written by the *Times* reporting staff about an issue that held center stage in Washington for nearly a week. Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle addressed the subject on several Sunday interview programs, pointing to the extraordinary fact that, for the Bush administration, "continuity of government" did not include

the legislature or judiciary. The *Times* buried his comments in an article devoted to the Democrats' mild criticism of Bush's conduct of the global "war on terrorism."

On Monday, the conflict over government secrecy and the Bush administration's refusal to subordinate the executive branch to normal constitutional constraints was intensified when Tom Ridge, Bush's director of homeland security, announced he would refuse to testify before a Senate committee holding hearings on the White House request for \$38 billion to fund domestic security programs.

Both Democratic and Republican senators had requested that Ridge testify. Meanwhile, several Republican senators, including John McCain of Arizona and Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, joined Daschle in criticizing the failure of the White House to notify Congress of the "continuity of government" plans.

These controversies were front-page news in *USA Today*, the *Washington Post* and many other US newspapers. The *Times* reported extensively only on Ridge's refusal to testify, relegating all coverage of the "shadow government" to two paragraphs in that article, noting that House Speaker Dennis Hastert, an Illinois Republican, knew of the contingency plan. The newspaper did not assess the significance of the fact that Republicans were informed of the existence of the secret government, but Democrats were not.

On Tuesday, after four days of public recriminations, the White House called in Daschle and Senate Republican leader Trent Lott to brief them officially on the "continuity of government" plans for the executive branch, assuring them that similar measures might be taken for the other two branches of government. The next day House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, a Democrat, received a briefing.

The *Times* did not assign anyone from its large Washington staff to report on these meetings and the statements of the Democrats afterwards, running brief wire service accounts instead.

A series of lies by Bush aides have been exposed in the course of the controversy, but the *Times* has taken no note of them. The White House claimed that two Senate functionaries, the secretary and sergeant at arms, had been briefed on the contingency plan last September 22, and produced signed receipts acknowledging the briefings. But this was quickly revealed to be a gross distortion. The two officials issued a statement declaring that they had only been given a tour of one of the bunkers, but “were not briefed on a program involving executive branch personnel being assigned on a rotating basis to ensure operation of the executive branch.”

Administration officials claimed that they had briefed Senator Robert Byrd, who is fourth in the line of presidential succession, on the shadow government. An aide to the Democrat disputed this account, saying that Byrd had been offered information on the succession process last June, when he became president *pro tempore* of the Senate after the Democrats assumed control of the upper house. Byrd was never told about the secret evacuation of selected executive branch officials. “Not once did they say ‘we want to talk about a government-in-waiting,’” the spokesman said.

On Wednesday the White House was still engaged in an attempt to head off public criticism of its secret plans. Press spokesman Ari Fleischer deplored the label “shadow government” and presented the standby operation as a routine bureaucratic precaution that had no political significance.

He even claimed that “continuity of government” was an entirely separate program from “succession measures” aimed at ensuring the transition in the leadership of government agencies in the event of an attack that killed top officials.

Fleischer’s verbal contortions were an attempt to dispel the clear implication of the establishment of such a secret apparatus of executive power: that the Bush administration is preparing dictatorial measures to be unveiled once a suitable pretext, i.e., a real or purported terrorist attack on Washington, is found.

The *Times* has displayed an astonishing lack of interest in the whole subject, expressed not only in its minimal news coverage, but in the virtual silence of its editorial pages. Commentator Maureen Dowd raised some concerns in her column, but there has been no reference to the “shadow government” in any *Times* editorial.

This silence is not an aberration, but part of a larger pattern: the collapse of any commitment to the defense of democratic rights in any significant section of the US ruling elite, including the formerly liberal elements whose views are voiced by the *Times*. This profound shift to the right was

expressed in the editorial support and practical assistance which the *Times* gave to the investigations of the Clinton White House, inspired by the Republican right, which culminated in impeachment.

The low point in this abandonment of democratic principles—at least before September 11—came in the acquiescence by the *Times* and the rest of the “liberal” media to the hijacking of the 2000 presidential election. As the Supreme Court, by a 5-4 majority, expounded the principle that the American people have no constitutional right to vote for president and ordered a halt to the counting of votes in Florida, the *Times* preached submission to the Court’s authority and acceptance of Bush’s legitimacy.

Now, even the revelation that this illegitimate government has established a secret, unelected government-in-waiting, behind the backs of the American people and the Congress, fails to elicit a response from the erstwhile guardians of liberalism.

This is not to say there has been no press concern about the mounting threat to democratic rights, but such concern has been limited to isolated columns in smaller regional newspapers.

The *Times-Union* of Albany, New York, editorialized March 5 that under Bush’s plan “the US government would be handed over to some 100 unelected civilians in the event of a catastrophe.” It called this “an unsettling prospect.”

The *News-Journal* of Daytona Beach, Florida, took a sharper line, headlining its March 4 editorial, “White House junta is undermining democracy.”

“The danger right now is not terrorism,” the newspaper declared. “The danger is here at home, where zealotry is substituting for policy-making, where the flag is turning into the administration’s fig leaf, and where slander is any opposition’s reward. Without robust dissent democracy might as well pack up and head for the hills. So far, Daschle’s grumbles included, dissent has been non-existent. This is not unity. It’s not patriotism. It’s stupor.”

Such comments in the American media have been few and far between. The prostration of the *New York Times* is the rule, not the exception. This demonstrates an important political truth: the initiative for a struggle against the Bush administration’s policy of war-without-end abroad and the dismantling of democratic rights at home will come, not from ex-liberal sections of the ruling class, but from an independent political movement of the working people.



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