

The shadow of dictatorship: Bush established secret government after September 11

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The Bush administration has established a “shadow government,” consisting of 75 to 150 officials of the executive branch who have been dispatched to secure, fortified locations to provide “continuity of government,” supposedly as a precaution against a possible nuclear terrorist attack on the US capital, the *Washington Post* reported Friday. An executive order for temporary evacuation was issued shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, and the arrangement was made permanent a month later.

The administration decided to implement longstanding contingency plans prepared during the Cold War but never before activated. More than 100 officials were evacuated by helicopter within hours of the suicide hijackings which destroyed the World Trade Center and damaged the Pentagon.

They were taken to two locations, believed to be in mountainous terrain in the eastern United States, which became the seat of a temporary regime. In late October the arrangement was made permanent. Since then, officials drawn from top levels of the civil service, just below the appointed cabinet and sub-cabinet level, have been rotated at 90-day intervals. Legal documents have been drafted to give these officials the full powers of the executive branch in the event of a catastrophe.

Administration spokesmen have confirmed the *Post* report, and Bush himself discussed the subject at a Republican Party campaign appearance in Iowa. “We take the continuity-of-government issue seriously because our nation was under attack,” Bush declared. “Until this country has routed out terrorists wherever they try to hide, we’re not safe.” In other words, the secret government, like the “war on terrorism” itself, is open-ended.

According to a further report in the *Post* March 3, the

Bush administration has deployed the Delta Force within the United States—the same elite commando unit which spearheaded the war in Afghanistan—placing it on standby alert to engage in anti-terrorist actions around Washington in the event of possible nuclear attack.

An unconstitutional regime

The most sinister characteristic of this secret government is that it consists entirely of executive branch officials, in complete violation of the separation of powers which is the heart of the US constitutional system. No one in the other two branches of government, the legislative and judicial, was included in the plans or even aware of them. In the event such an emergency government were to emerge, it would be an openly dictatorial regime, consisting solely of executive branch officials exercising military and police powers, without any legislative oversight or judicial check on their actions.

Despite the rhetoric about “continuity of government,” the Bush plan is not based on presidential succession as defined in the US Constitution. Vice President Dick Cheney, who would succeed in the event of Bush’s death or incapacity, is in direct charge of the whole operation. But the third and fourth in the order of succession, House Speaker Dennis Hastert and Senate President Pro Tem Robert Byrd, were not involved or even aware of the government they would nominally head.

The Bush administration is apparently in violation of a 1988 executive order on emergency preparedness

issued by President Reagan, which instructed the National Security Council to “arrange for Executive branch liaison with, and assistance to, the Congress and the federal judiciary on national security-emergency preparedness matters.”

In television interviews on Sunday, the leading congressional Democrat, Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, confirmed that neither he nor any other congressional leader had been consulted about the plan. Asked whether this constituted a secret government, not just potentially in the future, but in actuality today, he replied, “I don’t know. I don’t know what their role is, what their current authority is, because we haven’t been informed. You’d think one person in Congress would know, and whether a congressional and judicial component is included.”

This is an extraordinary state of affairs: the leader of the US Senate, the most powerful legislator in Washington, admits that he does not know whether the US government still observes the conventions of democratic rule, or whether it is being run behind the scenes by unelected officials who are not responsible for their actions either to elected representatives or to the public as a whole.

From a political standpoint, the establishment of a secret government is the culmination of a protracted, behind-the-scenes struggle for power in official Washington which has consumed nearly an entire decade. This initially took the form of a legal/media/congressional campaign to destabilize the Clinton administration, including the shutdown of the federal government in 1995-96, and a series of independent counsel investigations which culminated in impeachment.

This was followed by the antidemocratic intervention of the Supreme Court into the 2000 presidential election, suppressing the vote-counting in Florida and awarding the presidency to Bush. Now an unelected president has established a secret, military-backed government of unelected officials, behind the backs of the elected members of the Congress, Democratic and Republican alike. The Bush administration has seized on the “war on terrorism” to implement a sweeping change in American foreign policy and political life: the implementation of a radical right-wing program of militarism abroad and attacks on democratic rights at home.

The greatest threat to the American people comes, not from foreign terrorists or Islamic fundamentalists, but from the behind-the-scenes machinations of the American government itself. The terrorist attacks—in which the role of US intelligence agencies and the US military still remains to be investigated—have become the pretext for the setting up of a parallel government, concealed from the legislature. The “war on terrorism” has become the foundation on which the Bush administration has begun to erect a military-police dictatorship, run by a secret cabal of unnamed officials, working out of the White House and various “undisclosed secure locations.”



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