

Government by provocation: Bush administration escalates terror warnings

The Editorial Board

24 May 2002

The series of statements over the past several days from the Bush administration, warning of terrorist attacks that could take the lives of thousands, if not millions of Americans, constitutes a huge political provocation. One after another, top officials declared that new attacks, involving biological, chemical or nuclear weapons, were inevitable, and the government was powerless to prevent them.

The message was unmistakable: every person residing in the United States had to accept the prospect that at any moment he or she might be blown up or poisoned. The population as a whole was destined to endure more traumas like the destruction of the World Trade Center, and even worse catastrophes.

These wild predictions—all of which were issued without any substantiation—were not the misstatements of “loose cannons” within the government. They came from the highest levels in an orchestrated succession of warnings. The first was issued Sunday, May 19 by Vice President Richard Cheney, who declared that another terrorist attack on a US target, likely even bloodier than the September 11 hijack-bombings, was “almost certain.” Cheney, who appeared on several network television interview programs, added that attacks by suicide bombers in public places, like those in Israel, were “a real possibility.”

He was followed Monday by FBI Director Robert Mueller, in a speech to district attorneys near Washington. Mueller said suicide bombings on the Israeli-Palestinian model were “inevitable” in the United States. “There will be another terrorist attack,” Mueller said, adding, “We will not be able to stop it. It’s something we all live with.”

The next warning came on Tuesday from Bush’s top domestic official for anti-terrorism planning, Director of Homeland Security Tom Ridge. The former Pennsylvania governor said that further terrorist attacks on Americans were “not a question of if, but a question of when.”

Secretary of State Colin Powell sounded the same theme in releasing the State Department’s annual report on terrorism Tuesday. He told a press conference that “terrorists are trying every way they can to get their hands on weapons of mass destruction, whether radiological, chemical, biological or nuclear.”

The most apocalyptic statements came Tuesday from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who told a

congressional committee to expect a terrorist attack on the United States using weapons of mass destruction, including nuclear materials. He said that Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya and North Korea were developing nuclear, biological and chemical weapons and would supply them to terrorist organizations.

“I’m just facing the facts,” Rumsfeld said. “That’s the world we live in.”

Rumsfeld’s language heightened the bizarre impression left by his testimony. Speaking of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, he declared, “They jerk us around, try to jerk us around, and test us.” As if to underscore the terrifying implications of his words, he added, “We are going to be living in a period of limited or no warning because of the asymmetrical advantages of the attacker as opposed to the defender.”

Compounding the effect of the warnings from Bush administration officials was an FBI alert that New York City landmarks, including the Brooklyn Bridge and the Statue of Liberty, had been targeted for terrorist attack. The FBI admitted that its warning was based on vague and uncorroborated threats, but it was sufficient to impel city authorities to implement extraordinary measures not seen since the immediate aftermath of September 11. The Brooklyn Bridge was closed down for periods on Tuesday and Wednesday, and systematic vehicle searches were conducted at major bridge and tunnel entrances throughout the city on both days. The FBI also warned of potential attacks on New York apartment buildings.

Whatever the underlying motives, the intended effect of the government’s statements and actions is to engender a mood of general fear and panic. Such methods brand those in power as reckless and dangerous political provocateurs.

It is no accident that the government’s dire predictions come in the midst of revelations that call into question the official story of September 11: that the Bush administration and the US intelligence apparatus had no forewarnings of the attacks, and could not have taken action to prevent them. The unraveling of the edifice of lies and evasions surrounding the events of last September threatens to undermine the legitimacy of all of the sweeping measures taken by the government since then.

Just as the destruction of the World Trade Center was seized on to stampede a shocked and disoriented public into accepting a drastic shift in US policy, in accordance with plans for war

abroad and repression at home already drawn up by the Bush administration, so now the government seeks to create a public mood of anxiety and confusion to preempt growing demands for a full investigation of its previous actions, while justifying new and even more extreme measures.

If one takes Rumsfeld and company at their word, one is left with an acknowledgement of the bankruptcy of the American political establishment and the policy it has pursued for more than a decade. During the half-century of Cold War confrontation between US imperialism and the Soviet bloc, when thousands of nuclear-armed missiles were aimed at the American mainland and vice versa, no high-level US official ever publicly predicted that a nuclear attack on the US population was inevitable.

The American ruling elite felt obliged to counter the danger of such a disaster by developing a wide-ranging political strategy, including mechanisms such as arms control agreements, diplomatic exchanges, hot lines, etc. No nuclear bombs were dropped during this period.

But in the decade-plus since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the US has increasingly relied on its unchallenged military supremacy to impose its will on the rest of the world, spurning diplomacy in favor of bullying, threats and violence. Beginning with the administration of the elder George Bush, the US has waged three major wars—against Iraq, Serbia and Afghanistan—and carried out many smaller-scale military actions around the world.

The turn to militarism has reached a new level of recklessness and violence under the present Bush administration. The US now disavows all political methods for preventing conflicts. It refuses to negotiate with those it considers to be terrorists or “rogue states.” It dispatches its military to the most volatile regions of the world, and refuses to back off even when its armed interventions inflame global tensions to the breaking point—as in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. Instead, it prepares for new and even more incendiary interventions, most immediately, against Iraq.

The US has become the single most destabilizing force in the world. The brutal and predatory character of its policies has generated ever more intense hostility among broad masses of oppressed and impoverished people in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and even within Europe. These policies, which are carried out to defend the interests of the US corporate elite, not those of the working class, are ultimately responsible for the social and political conditions that breed terrorism.

If Rumsfeld’s claims are true—that after a decade of wars and despite a new and massive expansion of the US military, terrorist counterstrikes of catastrophic proportions are unavoidable—then the net result of the militaristic policies he embodies has been to doom the American people to death and destruction on a horrific scale.

It is obvious to all those able to think critically that the apocalyptic warnings emanating from the government will be

used to justify not only further military adventures overseas, but also a further crackdown on democratic rights within the US. This government by provocation is possible only because of the complicity of the media and the lack of any opposition from the Democratic Party. It is not backed by a popular mandate of the people. In fact, the Bush administration feels compelled to resort to desperate methods precisely because it has been unable to generate a patriotic war frenzy among broad layers of the population. The vast majority of working people are far more concerned with the threat to their jobs and living standards arising from the deepening economic and social crisis, for which the government has no answers.

The Bush administration must be called to account. It must be compelled to lay out before the American people the factual basis for its warnings and threats. Claims of executive privilege or the requirements of wartime “national security” are red herrings. If the people are being told that thousands or even millions are going to die in terror attacks that cannot be prevented, then they have a right to know the facts on which these claims are based. If, moreover, the government is using these doomsday predictions to arrogate to itself extraordinary powers—and it is—then the people have an absolute right to know the basis for such measures. It is their lives and their democratic rights that are at stake.

Beyond the people’s right to know, the Bush administration’s modus operandi of lies and provocation raises an even more basic question: the future of the people of the US and, indeed, of the entire world depends on the mobilization of the working class on the basis of a new political orientation. It is not simply a matter of removing one government. The world’s people require a genuinely democratic and progressive perspective. To liberate mankind from the nightmare of war, tyranny and social degradation into which it is being dragged by politically and morally bankrupt ruling elites, the working masses of all countries must be united around a revolutionary program to reconstruct society on socialist foundations.



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