

The US terror alert

Washington employs fear and panic as instruments of war

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The Bush administration, together with the government of Tony Blair in Britain, has over the past week launched a concerted campaign to sow fear and terror among the American and British people in an effort to overcome widespread opposition to the impending invasion of Iraq.

Following the Homeland Security Department's declaration of a "code orange" terror alert in the US, humvees mounted with anti-aircraft batteries have been deployed in the shadows of the Washington Monument and the US Capitol, while machine-gun toting SWAT teams have been sent into the streets of New York City. In London, tanks and combat troops are patrolling Heathrow Airport.

Why has "code orange," signifying a "high" threat of terrorist attacks, been declared? No US official has offered a specific or credible reason. Vague references are made to "increased chatter" overheard by intelligence agencies, the end of the Haj in Mecca, etc. There is not a single verifiable fact.

The US media makes no attempt to critically examine the government's claims. On the contrary, it accepts every claim made by the government as fact, while working to hype the warnings and promote popular panic and anxiety. NBC Nightly News, for example, on Thursday included a segment on the operations—alleged without any substantiation—of Al Qaeda cells supposedly active within the US.

In announcing "code orange," Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge insisted that the alert was based on "the accumulation of credible corroborated sources, none of which are connected to the possibility of military involvement with Iraq." Ridge's words were obviously aimed at countering the well-founded suspicion among broad layers of the public that the terror warning has everything to do with the coming "military involvement with Iraq."

What purpose does the terror alert serve? It has nothing to do with protecting the American people. For all of the pronouncements, there is no indication whatsoever that the US government has developed any serious public health plan to deal with a mass disaster caused by chemical, biological or nuclear attacks. Rather, the Bush administration is proposing to slash \$2 billion in funding for firefighters and other emergency workers who would respond to a disaster, while urging members of the public to buy duct tape and plastic sheeting, materials that most experts believe would be useless in such an emergency.

As with the terror alerts announced after the September 11 hijack bombings, the people are given no serious instructions as to how they should respond. Government officials advise them to proceed with their lives as normal, but be more "alert." The only substance of such

instructions is for the American people to accept as a fact of life the presence of troops, tanks and missile batteries on the streets and at public venues, and accede to the erosion of their civil liberties.

The real objectives behind the administration's color-coded terror warnings are political. First, they serve to put the entire political and media establishment on notice that there is to be no more questioning of the administration's war policy, on pain of being charged with aiding and abetting terrorism. Both the Democratic politicians and the major print and broadcast outlets have obediently complied.

Second, they provide a pretext for a crackdown on popular dissent. It can hardly be an accident that the warnings specifically referred to the heightened possibility of a terrorist attack through this weekend, coinciding with mass demonstrations on every continent that are expected to bring 10 to 15 million people into the streets. Already, the attempts to organize such protests in the US have met with unprecedented attacks on fundamental democratic rights, with the New York City Police Department, backed by a posse of federal judges, denying demonstrators the right to march.

The latest alert was issued in the wake of revelations that the Justice Department had drafted legislation that would dramatically strengthen the police-state powers assumed by the government with the passage of the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act. Provisions included in this document would allow the federal government to declare any US citizen an official enemy at war with the nation. People could be imprisoned or stripped of their citizenship for supporting a group or even an individual deemed by the US to be terrorist. The publication of information on the fate of these individuals would likewise be a crime. The leaking of the document prompted outrage from civil liberties groups, but the controversy has been superseded by the new "terrorist threat."

Finally, the warning of imminent attack works to increase public anxiety, politically disorient the populace, and thereby facilitate the execution of the Bush administration's war plans.

There is every reason to treat the claims of an imminent terrorist threat with the greatest skepticism. This is a government whose modus operandi is lying, provocation and intimidation. Such were the means utilized by the Bush campaign to gain control of the White House in the 2000 election, employing physical threats to halt ballot counts and relying on the intervention of the right-wing Supreme Court majority to secure power.

Such methods reflect the essential social and political character of the Bush administration. It is a government that, in its policies, outlook and personnel, embodies the most reactionary and predatory

sections of the ruling elite—precisely those which employed criminal methods to plunder the economy and enrich themselves over the past two decades.

It operates with utter contempt for both democratic rights and the sentiments of the majority of the American people. The administration is well aware of the yawning gap between the criminal war it is preparing to launch and the lack of any broad base of popular support for such a venture.

Speech after speech by Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell and others proclaiming Iraq a mortal threat to the United States have failed to shift the majority of the population from either outright opposition or skepticism toward the administration's brief for war. Claims that the invasion will "liberate" the Iraqi people from tyranny or end human rights abuses have been equally ineffective.

What remains is an appeal to naked fear, with the claim that terrorist attacks are imminent and that invading Iraq is the only way to halt them. It is a pretext founded on distortions and lies. Powell's speech to the UN Security Council included a string of allegations aimed at demonstrating collaboration between Al Qaeda, the movement blamed for the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and the regime of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad. In barely a week, all of these accusations have proven false.

The key figure linking Al Qaeda and the Baathist regime in Iraq was said to be Abu Musab Zarqawi, portrayed as an Al Qaeda associate enjoying safe haven in Baghdad. But in testimony before the Senate Armed Service Committee this week, CIA Director George Tenet acknowledged that Zarqawi and his organization are "independent" of Al Qaeda. Following Tenet's testimony, moreover, US intelligence sources told the *Washington Post* they had no idea where Zarqawi was.

On Tuesday Powell breathlessly announced the existence of an audiotape allegedly made by Osama bin Laden. It demonstrated "how he is in partnership with Iraq," said the secretary of state, adding, "This nexus between terrorist states that are developing weapons of mass destruction can no longer be looked away from and ignored."

This word "nexus" can be loosely translated as "crude fabrication" meant to provide a pretext for war. Powell was lying about the content of the audiotape. It included denunciations of Saddam Hussein and his supporters as "infidels." It stated, "The socialists [Iraq's ruling Arab Baath Socialist Party] and the rulers have lost their legitimacy a long time ago, and the socialists are infidels regardless of where they are, whether in Baghdad or in Aden."

If the tape is indeed genuine and demonstrates anything, it is bin Laden's contempt for Saddam Hussein and his intention to seize upon a war of aggression against Iraq to promote his own reactionary movement as the sole resistance to Washington's attempt to dominate the Middle East. Bin Laden's claims of solidarity with the Iraqi people are no more proof of a "nexus" with the Baghdad regime than Bush's posturing as the "liberator" of Iraq makes the US president Saddam Hussein's ally.

Can the possibility of a terrorist attack be excluded? Certainly not. The Bush administration's war drive against Iraq, combined with its unwavering support for the campaign of military repression waged by Israel against the Palestinians in the occupied territories, has no doubt generated immense popular anger in the Middle East, some of which may be diverted into the retrograde politics of terror practiced by Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda and similar movements.

That being said, it is worth recalling one of the stage effects included in Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations Security

Council last week. Powell held up a small vial and said that it could contain the same amount of anthrax used in attacks that killed two postal workers, sent hundreds to the hospital and led to the evacuation of the US Capitol and other government office buildings in Washington.

The gesture was revealing. It is now well established that the anthrax used in these attacks, which were directed at two top Senate Democrats and the media, came not from Iraq or Al Qaeda, but from US military stockpiles. The prime suspects are linked to US biological weapons programs. In carrying out the attacks, the perpetrator or perpetrators sent messages designed to make them appear like the work of Islamist terrorists. Powell's use of this example underscored the fraudulent nature of the entire US case for war.

All of the evidence indicates that the only deadly terrorist attacks since September 11, 2001 and the only use of chemical weapons on US soil had their origins within the national security apparatus of the US government itself. No one has ever been arrested for these attacks and the authorities have remained silent on any attempt to catch those responsible. The government's role in relation to this act of terrorism is characterized by conspiracy and cover-up.

It should further be noted that the US government has never, 17 months after the fact, undertaken a serious investigation into the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. It has never offered the American people an explanation of precisely what happened, and how the perpetrators were able to carry out their crime despite massive US surveillance of bin Laden and his cohorts. The lack of any such accounting not only reeks of cover-up and possible complicity, it also makes a mockery of the government's current claims to be motivated purely by concerns for the safety and security of the American people.

If an act of terrorism does occur under the current political conditions, the Bush administration itself or elements within the state intelligence or military apparatus would themselves be prime suspects. In their desperation to launch a war, it cannot be excluded that they will either provoke or allow terrorist violence against US citizens to provide what they until now have lacked, a convincing *casus belli* for the long-planned military conquest of Iraq.



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