

US Homeland Security's "Operation Liberty Shield" targets democratic rights

"Orange" terror alert designed to terrorize and intimidate

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One hour before President Bush went on television the evening of March 17 to issue his ultimatum in preparation for war on Iraq, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge made the decision to raise the national terrorism threat level to orange, the second highest level. At the same time, Ridge activated a security plan called "Operation Liberty Shield," which calls for unprecedented domestic security measures, supposedly to protect American citizens from impending terrorist attacks.

As with previous terrorism alerts issued by the Department of Homeland Security and the Justice Department, no specific information was provided on where the attacks could be expected or what the government's intelligence sources were. Ridge only cited "highly reliable" reports that terrorists would attempt attacks "against US and coalition targets worldwide in the event of a US-led military campaign against Saddam Hussein." FBI officials have also commented that "the bureau is very concerned" about potential attacks from "lone wolves"—individuals disgruntled over government policy.

Since the events of September 11, 2001, the Bush administration has repeatedly used such alerts, or vague advisories of impending terrorist attacks, with one central objective in mind: to generate an atmosphere of fear, anxiety and hysteria in the American population in an attempt to make it more amenable to military aggression abroad and further attacks on democratic rights at home. In this, the government has been assisted by a pliant media, which has bombarded the public with warnings of imminent terrorist attacks without supplying the slightest substantiation.

With the US attack on Iraq now under way, the

heightened terror alert level is being utilized to justify increased repression against actual or potential opponents of the Bush administration's war policy.

In a move denounced by civil liberties groups and immigrants advocates, the Homeland Security Department has also implemented what it says is a temporary policy of detaining asylum-seekers from 33 nations where Al Qaeda is reported to have operated. This could result in hundreds of arrests, as some 600 people from these countries seek asylum in the US each year. Up to 60 percent of these asylum-seekers come from Iraq, and those targeted also include immigrants from the West Bank and Gaza. All these asylum-seekers will be jailed until their cases are adjudicated, which could mean months in detention, and in some cases more than a year.

On March 20, the FBI began "voluntary" interviews of Iraqi-born individuals living in the US. These interrogations are not based on any evidence of criminal or terrorist activity, but solely on ethnicity and national origin. FBI officials began going door-to-door, with plans to question 400 Iraqi nationals in Detroit, 200 in Philadelphia and similar numbers in other large metropolitan areas.

By last Friday, teams of agents from the Homeland Security Bureau of Immigration Enforcement in the Detroit area had arrested about a dozen men, and were reportedly looking for hundreds more. On Saturday, agents interviewed more than 20 Iraqi men, and detained at least two who, they alleged, had criminal backgrounds. It is unclear how many still remain in custody, and federal agents declined to provide any details on why they suspected the men of being terrorist threats.

Abed Ayoub, 23, a law student living in Dearborn, told the *Detroit Free Press*, “When they start picking and choosing who they want to detain, it reminds you of what happened to Japanese-Americans during World War II.”

Since the US launched its war on Iraq, more than 3,000 antiwar demonstrators have been arrested across the country. One of the political aims of the Orange terror alert is to suggest that all such protesters are “aiding and abetting” the terrorists, and some local and state police departments have responded by coming down hard on demonstrators.

Provisions activated by the “Orange” threat level include: stepped-up surveillance at US ports, borders and airports; Coast Guard escorts for watercraft near petrochemical plants; tightened security at nuclear power plants; increased disease monitoring to detect signs of bio-terrorism; and increased inspections of imported foods.

In New York City, police have increased security outside major Manhattan television news outlets, with the stated purpose of preventing possible takeovers by terrorists seeking to broadcast anti-American messages. The New York Police Department admits that the step has not been prompted by any specific threat or piece of intelligence information.

Unless the federal government specifically orders a call-up of National Guard troops to patrol a national border, for instance, the states foot the bill. The Department of Homeland Security has urged state governors to deploy National Guard troops at nuclear power stations and other potential terrorist targets, but has provided no funding. States are also responsible for providing increased funding for state and local police operations and private security firms.

After months of pressure from state and local government leaders who say that the Bush administration and Congressional Republicans have reneged on promises to provide them with billions of dollars to fund firefighting and rescue operations, the White House on March 19 said it would ask Congress to pass an emergency domestic counterterrorism spending package, including \$1 billion for the Transportation Security Administration, \$200-700 million for the Coast Guard and increases in grants for local police and fire departments.

No rational person would deny that the threat of new

terrorist attacks is real. This danger has been further intensified by the US war on Iraq, which will inflame anti-American sentiment worldwide.

A basic prerequisite for preventing such attacks in the future is a thorough examination of the 9/11 hi-jack bombings, as well as the anthrax attacks that targeted Congressional Democrats. But the Bush administration has vigorously blocked any investigation into these events, because they know that any such investigation would be politically devastating. [See “One year after the terror attacks: still no official investigation into September 11”]

At best, it would reveal criminal levels of negligence on the part of US police and intelligence agencies in thwarting the attacks. More likely it would uncover complicity at the highest levels of the state with the terrorist forces that carried out the attacks, including connections between the terrorists and US, British or Israeli intelligence.



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