The US blackout and "homeland security"

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Last week's massive blackout demonstrated the destructive impact of an economic system that subordinates the basic necessities of life, including electricity, to corporate profit and the accumulation of personal wealth. The workings of this system pose a far more immediate and profound threat to the security of the American people than any terrorist cell or so-called rogue nation.

The blackout also revealed that the Bush administration does not take its own pronouncements about the terrorist threat seriously—at least insofar as the safety and security of ordinary Americans are concerned.

Within 45 minutes of the lights going off over a large swath of North America, leaving some 50 million people in the US and Canada without power, officials in the Bush administration's Homeland Security Department announced that the disaster had not been caused by an act of terrorism. This assessment was repeated by state and local officials to an anxious population.

For nearly two years the Bush administration has issued repeated warnings of heightened terror threats based on little more than unsubstantiated "chatter" supposedly detected by one or another intelligence agency. It has, by such means, deliberately set out to spread fear and panic, the better to impose its agenda of war abroad and repression at home.

Yet, when a genuine disaster struck the American people, the administration rushed to affirm that there was no evidence of terrorism—before any investigation into the cause of the blackout had even begun. How did the Homeland Security analysts know that terrorism was not to blame for the blackout before the source of the cascading power failure had even been pinpointed?

The Homeland Security Department was created, in the name of the "war on terror" and national security, to concentrate and extend the police powers of the state. It is a center of the administration's offensive against basic democratic rights. The blackout demonstrated the degree to which a pre-existing political agenda of social reaction and militarism, rather than a legitimate concern over the

potential threat to life and limb from terrorist groups, motivated its formation and has, since its inception, guided its operations.

The blackout plunged one-sixth of the American people, and such centers of finance and industry as New York, Cleveland and Detroit, into darkness. Whether or not the disaster was caused by terrorists, it unquestionably provided any individuals or groups looking to terrorize or harm the population ideal conditions to strike a blow.

Yet Tom Ridge, the head of Homeland Security, who regularly calls press conferences to announce, seemingly out of the blue, a heightened terrorist threat, was barely in evidence during the power outage. (Another individual conspicuous for his absence was the "commander in chief," George W. Bush). As of Monday, two days after power had been restored, the Homeland Security Department's web site carried no mention of the blackout. Its most recent message from Secretary Tom Ridge was a speech delivered earlier this month to mark the Coast Guard's 213th birthday.

Neither Ridge nor anyone else in the Bush administration thought to elevate the famous color-coded terrorist threat advisory chart from yellow to amber. (The chart has never fallen below yellow since its inception, but has on numerous occasions been raised to amber on the basis of vague warnings from US intelligence sources).

Nine nuclear power reactors were forced to shut down during the blackout. Had the diesel generators used to maintain essential operations at any one of these plants failed, a catastrophic nuclear meltdown would have occurred.

Reports submitted to the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission after the blackout noted that the emergency sirens used to warn of such a meltdown were knocked out at both the Indian Point and Ginna nuclear plants in New York. Had a meltdown taken place at one of these plants, hundreds of thousands of people in surrounding communities would have received deadly doses of radiation without even being aware of what has

happening.

Thousands of people trapped in trains underground; tens of thousands massing at bridges, bus stations and ferry terminals; essential communications, including both cell phones and emergency response systems, disrupted; nuclear power plants and similar facilities at risk—but nothing, apparently, for the department ostensibly formed to secure the "homeland" to get particularly bothered about.

Could there be any clearer demonstration that the so-called Homeland Security Department, and, indeed, the entire "war on terror" constitute a gigantic and sinister fraud?

The Bush administration seized on the September 11 terrorist attacks as the pretext for implementing a far-reaching foreign and domestic agenda long advocated by the most reactionary elements of the American ruling elite. Its own role, and that of elements within the intelligence apparatus, in allowing the hijack-bombings to take place despite multiple warnings and prior knowledge of the terrorist connections of at least some of the perpetrators has never been explained.

Ever since September 11, the administration has raised the specter of terrorist attacks when it served its interests. It discounts them when it does not. In advance of the congressional vote on the Patriot Act, which gave the government unprecedented powers to spy on Americans and railroad them to prison, warnings were issued at a feverish pace. The same pattern occurred in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq.

This fearmongering has nothing to do with protecting the American people. Its principal function is to distract public attention from the criminal policies that are being pursued by the Bush administration both at home and abroad, and the increasingly dire social consequences arising from the crisis of American capitalism.

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