

US attorney general's "Patriot" tour: the specter of a police state

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13 September 2003

The Bush administration has seized upon the second anniversary of the September 11 attacks as an opportunity to push for a further expansion of the police-state powers it has assumed in the name of fighting a "war on terrorism."

On the eve of the anniversary, Bush traveled to Quantico, Virginia, to speak before FBI academy cadets and Marine Corps personnel. The trip was in keeping with a well-established pattern in which the US president's public appearances are largely restricted to audiences packed with police and military personnel.

Bush's message in Quantico was to demand that the US Congress "untie the hands of our law enforcement officials" in the "war against terror." Specifically, he called for the introduction of "administrative subpoenas" in cases where suspects are alleged to be terrorists, allowing police to seize sensitive documents without seeking court approval. He likewise demanded greater powers to hold suspects without bail—including those who are not charged with any violent activity—as well as a further expansion of the death penalty.

These measures constitute elements of the so-called "Patriot II" act, also known as the Domestic Security Enhancement Act, a draft legislative package that was prepared in secret and then leaked to the press in February. Other measures in this act include increased powers of the government to carry out secret arrests and indefinite detentions and would allow the US attorney general to strip Americans of their US citizenship if they are deemed to have provided support to a group labeled by the government as terrorist.

Reaction to these repressive proposals was so hostile that the administration has yet to present it to Congress. Bush's speech seemed to suggest that it will now seek to push them through piecemeal.

The president's speech in Quantico followed on the heels of an 18-city tour by US Attorney General John

Ashcroft that was billed as a defense of the Patriot Act, the most sweeping expansion of the government's powers of search, seizure and detention to be enacted in US history. It was pushed through Congress with near unanimous support of Democrats and Republicans alike and almost no debate in the weeks following the September 11 attacks.

Ashcroft appeared before invitation-only audiences consisting of uniformed police officers, prosecutors, military officials and right-wing Republican politicians. In city after city, the number of protesters outside these meetings either equaled or exceeded the attorney general's law enforcement audiences. In one of his last appearances, in Boston, over 1,200 demonstrated as Ashcroft spoke to a largely empty Faneuil Hall.

The Justice Department billed Ashcroft's tour as an attempt to clear up alleged public misconceptions about the Patriot Act—a recent CBS News poll indicated that more than half of the population is concerned about "losing your civil liberties as a result of recent measures enacted by the Bush administration to fight terror." Even the Justice Department's Inspector General's office found itself compelled to release a report in June detailing the abuse of 762 immigrants who were rounded up in the aftermath of September 11 and never charged with any crime.

Yet there was little indication, given the tightly controlled audiences and restrictions upon the media, that the attorney general's aim was to convince the public. Rather, the tour had much more the character of rallying the forces of state repression nationwide.

He spoke in messianic terms about their work, describing it as a "tribute to the dead of September 11." Appearing in New York City just two days before the September 11 anniversary, Ashcroft declared: "Providence, which has bestowed upon America the responsibility to lead the world in liberty, has also handed

America a great trust: to provide the security that ensures liberty. We accept this trust not with anger or arrogance but with belief.”

This right-wing Christian fundamentalist and rabid opponent of civil liberties is carrying out a mission for an administration that is confronting an unprecedented political crisis. Even its right-wing supporters like columnist Robert Novak have begun to speak of the White House confronting a “perfect storm” combining a debacle for the US occupation in Iraq with a continuing unemployment crisis at home. Polls now indicate that Bush’s approval ratings have fallen to the level that preceded the September 11, 2001 attack.

This is a government of gangsters installed through the theft of an election. Men like Bush, Cheney, Ashcroft and Rumsfeld accept no principles of legality and are influenced not in the slightest by democratic sensibilities. Their commitment lies to the thin layer at the top of society that has amassed enormous personal wealth and has used it to manipulate the US political system to its own ends.

In a column published in the *New York Times* Friday, Paul Krugman makes the following point about those who presently control the government: “Nor can the members of this administration simply lose like gentlemen. For one thing, that’s not how they operate. Furthermore, everything suggests that there are major scandals—involving energy policy, environmental policy, Iraq contracts and cooked intelligence—that would burst into the light of day if the current management lost its grip on power. So these people must win, at any cost.”

Krugman warns of an election campaign that will be “probably the nastiest of modern American history,” predicting that anyone who opposes the incumbent administration will be portrayed as a terrorist accomplice.

While this is no doubt true, any serious reflection on the present crisis of the Bush administration and its record in office poses far more troubling questions.

Bush and his cabinet have embraced murder as an instrument of foreign policy, with the US president publicly bragging about the kind of operations that intelligence agencies formerly denied they had ever conducted. They have repudiated international law, carrying out two wars of aggression in the space of a year and a half and holding prisoners of war in cages in Guantanamo Bay naval base under conditions that grossly violate the Geneva Conventions.

Is there any reason to believe that this administration will not resort to similar methods at home if it feels it is

threatened with being thrown out of office? As Krugman suggests, these are men who face the real prospect of imprisonment for criminal activities if they lose power.

There are the intimate connections of the administration with such massive corporate scandals as Enron, the awarding of the no-bid contracts to Vice President Cheney’s former company and the fomenting of an illegal and predatory war against Iraq on false pretexts. There is also the issue of September 11 itself, and the still unanswered questions concerning why the administration failed to act on advance warnings of an impending terrorist attack that then provided it with the justification for military and economic policies that it had planned well in advance.

As Ashcroft’s tour demonstrates, the administration is turning to the forces of state repression and the most backward elements in American society. It is attempting to mobilize these layers as a bulwark against growing opposition to the continuing war and occupation in Iraq and to a social and economic policy that has led to the greatest polarization between the wealthy and the broad mass of working people in the country’s history.

This is a government that has demanded—and in the case of immigrant detainees has already exercised—the right to carry out the kind of police-state measures that created thousands of “disappeared” under the military dictatorships that held power in Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s.

Ashcroft is now preaching the divine right of repression. How far is it from what the administration is now proposing to actively encouraging his police audiences to moonlight as state-sanctioned death squads against its political opponents?

American working people cannot afford to reassure themselves with the conception that “it can’t happen here.” There is a logic to the predatory and militarist policy that those who rule America pursue abroad. Faced with mass opposition, they will move toward similar methods at home as well.



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