

Bush's visit to London: Is a state provocation being prepared?

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Unprecedented security measures are being put in place for President George W. Bush's visit to London this week.

Between November 18 and November 19, Bush will stay at Buckingham Palace as the guest of Queen Elizabeth. His itinerary includes a meeting with Prime Minister Tony Blair at Downing Street on November 18, when mass protests against the war on Iraq and the ongoing occupation are expected. The president will make just one visit outside of London—a stage-managed visit to Blair's Sedgfield parliamentary constituency.

The state visit was first planned in September last year, but recent events have amplified its political importance for both leaders. Mounting resistance by the Iraqi people and the rising number of casualties have fuelled domestic opposition to the colonial takeover of Iraq, causing Bush's itinerary to be heavily curtailed.

The visit has reignited popular anger towards the war in Britain, which saw two million people gather in London as part of the international protests held last February 15. Relatives of British troops killed in Iraq have condemned Bush's visit and tens of thousands are expected to join protests against the two leaders.

The response of the US and British governments has sinister overtones. Media reports are filled with warnings of the possibility of terrorists using the protests as a cover for their activities. Most significantly, British police have made an explicit link between the protests and a possible attack on Bush by Al Qaeda.

A senior Scotland Yard spokesman told the *Times*, "We are not so concerned about some anti-war protester throwing rotten fruit at the president. Our worry now is the more dangerous elements who may be here."

The linkage of the protests with a possible attack by

Al Qaeda raises serious concerns that a state provocation is being prepared against the demonstrations. There are no details of the supposed terrorist threat and the Home Office has refused to comment. But London is being placed under a virtual state of siege. Some £19 million is being spent on security measures and all of Scotland Yard's armed units and up to 5,000 police officers will be on duty, with all leave cancelled.

Bush will be escorted by 250 heavily armed secret service agents, up to 150 national security officials and 50 White House aides. Two 747s and a specially chartered jumbo are to make the journey to the UK. Once in Britain, Bush will be accompanied by a specially converted black hawk helicopter and a motorcade of 20 armoured vehicles.

According to reports, US security officials had originally demanded the closure of London's underground rail network. The *Observer* reports "the British authorities agreed numerous concessions, including the creation of a 'sterile zone' around the president with a series of road closures in central London."

A no-fly zone is being established over Whitehall, "with the RAF on standby to shoot down unidentified planes," the *Mirror* reported. Britain has been put on its second highest terror alert, reportedly following warnings by Al Qaeda supporters from North Africa.

The police have also said they reserve the right to close roads at a moment's notice. Britain's senior police officer, John Stevens, admitted that security for the visit will be "unprecedented," but said that this was necessary because of "one, the level of terrorism threat and two, the nature of the president's visit."

In such circumstances, and with tensions already running high, it would be entirely possible for the

police or some other British or US state agency to create a security incident—possibly through the use of provocateurs in the crowd. This would serve the dual purpose of identifying opposition to the war with the activity of terrorist groups and lending a veil of legitimacy to the occupation of Iraq and the general offensive against democratic rights that has been mounted under the pretext of the pursuing the “war against terrorism.”

The possible repercussions for demonstrators and the organizers of the protests are grave. Under the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001, introduced in the wake of September 11, the security services have accrued powers traditionally identified with a police state.

London has been operating under an undisclosed state of emergency for the past two years, allowing random searches of buildings and people under Section 44 of the act for a period of up to 28 days, at the discretion of the home secretary.

Prior to the mass anti-war protests on February 15, over 450 troops and an extra 1,700 armed police officers were deployed at Heathrow airport and parts of London—measures that were authorized under the terms of the anti-terrorism act.

The legislation also enables non-UK nationals certified as “suspected international terrorists and national security risks” by the home secretary to be detained without charge or trial for an unlimited period. Detention can be based on secret evidence—which the detainee and his counsel cannot see or challenge. Sixteen foreign nationals are currently being held under these conditions in UK prisons. Just last month, ten men who have been held for two years without charge in high-security prisons or mental hospitals lost their appeals against detention.

In addition, the anti-terror law enables the police to impose sweeping powers to stop and search, and to arrest. More than 150 people were arrested in September during peaceful protests outside an international arms fair held in London. Several, including a student and a freelance photojournalist, were detained under the act. These two recently lost their case against their detention on the grounds that the police’s actions were “proportionate” to a perceived security threat.

The furor surrounding the president’s visit raises the

distinct possibility that this legislation could again be used against those protesting, who could find themselves hauled off to police cells on the grounds of national security.

This concern is highlighted by the ominous statement from the Home Office that armed US special agents accompanying the president would not be granted special immunity in the case of an “accidental shooting” of a protester.

Why is such a possibility of immunity being considered? Why would armed agents be anywhere near the protests? Whether these statements are intended purely to intimidate potential protesters, or worse, all those participating in demonstrations over the next several days should be vigilant and on their guard.



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