

The “war on terror” and American democracy—some ominous warnings

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Three commentaries published recently in the US media, all by well-connected observers of the US military, have suggested that a major new terrorist attack within the United States could disrupt the 2004 elections and even result in military intervention on the streets of America as well as the suspension of the Constitution.

On Friday, November 21, the right-wing web news service Newsmax.com published an account of the interview given by General Tommy Franks to the lifestyle magazine *Cigar Aficionado*.

Franks said that a terrorist attack employing a weapon of mass destruction and causing mass casualties, either in the United States or against an ally, would likely result in replacing the American Constitution with a military government.

As the commander of CentCom, Franks led US forces in the conquest of Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq earlier this year, before retiring during the summer. In his magazine interview, he outlined this scenario:

“It means the potential of a weapon of mass destruction and a terrorist, massive, casualty-producing event somewhere in the Western world—it may be in the United States of America—that causes our population to question our own Constitution and to begin to militarize our country in order to avoid a repeat of another mass, casualty-producing event. Which in fact, then begins to unravel the fabric of our Constitution. Two steps, very, very important.”

Frank remains a fervent supporter of the Bush administration, describing Bush as “a very thoughtful man,” and declaring, “Probably we’ll think of him in years to come as an American hero.”

But according to Franks, it may be under the administration of this “hero” that “the Western world, the free world, loses what it cherishes most, and that is freedom and liberty we’ve seen for a couple of hundred years in this grand experiment that we call democracy.”

The retired general placed the responsibility for this possible turn to dictatorship on “our population,” and was silent on what role the military leadership or the Bush administration would play in its establishment. The American media has apparently failed to ask him anything about it since.

The same theme was touched on in the Outlook section of the

Washington Post, the main daily newspaper in the US capital, in a column published Sunday, November 23, under the headline “Terrorist Logic: Disrupt the 2004 Election.”

The author was David J. Rothkopf, a former Clinton administration official now at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a major Washington think tank.

Rothkopf outlines the possibility of a terrorist campaign of suicide bombings during next fall’s election campaign that leads to a full-scale military mobilization. “History suggests that striking during major elections is an effective tool for terrorist groups,” he writes.

As a representative of the Democratic wing of the ruling elite, Rothkopf is clearly concerned that such an event would profit the Bush administration. He cites examples such as the Israeli elections in 1996, when suicide bombings contributed to the victory of right-wing Likud candidate Binyamin Netanyahu, and the 2000 Russian elections, won by Vladimir Putin after a series of bombings in Moscow and other cities—attributed to Chechen terrorists but widely believed to have been carried out or at least permitted by Putin’s KGB.

Rothkopf notes the politically symbiotic relationship between the terrorists and the hard-liners: “Hard-liners strike back more broadly, making it easier for terrorists as they attempt to justify their causes and their methods.” He could have added that the terrorists are a godsend for the hard-liners, providing a pretext for dictatorial methods.

More important than his argument—essentially restating the Democratic appeal for a more coordinated international approach to terrorism—is what Rothkopf reveals about the expectations in official Washington and corporate America. At one point he notes: “Recently, I co-chaired a meeting hosted by CNBC of more than 200 senior business and government executives, many of whom are specialists in security and terrorism related issues. Almost three-quarters of them said it was likely the United States would see a major terrorist strike before the end of 2004. A similar number predicted that the assault would be greater than those of 9/11 and might well involve weapons of mass destruction. It was the sense of the group that such an attack was likely to generate additional support for President Bush.”

This is a remarkable assertion. Rothkopf describes this elite

audience as “serious people, not prone to hysteria or panic—military officers, policymakers, scientists, researchers and others who have studied such issues for a long time.” The vast majority of them, he says, believe that a terrorist attack worse than September 11—that is, killing thousands or even tens of thousands of Americans—will take place in the course of the 2004 election campaign, and that this attack will benefit the political fortunes of George W. Bush.

The role of the military in domestic policing was the subject of a column published November 23, written by William Arkin, a well-connected military analyst for the *Los Angeles Times*.

It was Arkin who last year revealed the Bush administration’s decision to revise US military strategy to target seven countries—Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Libya, Syria, China and Russia—for possible nuclear attack.

The column was headlined, “Mission Creep Hits Home, American armed forces are assuming major new domestic policing and surveillance roles.” It examines the role of the Pentagon’s Northern Command, the newly established center for controlling all US armed forces within the continental US, Canada and Alaska, and includes an interview with its commander, Air Force General Ralph E. Eberhart.

According to Arkin, the Northern Command has defined three categories of operations, with increasing levels of activity: temporary, emergency and extraordinary. He writes: “It is only in the case of ‘extraordinary’ domestic operations that the unique capabilities of the Defense Department are deployed. These include not just such things as air patrols to shoot down hijacked planes or the defusing of bombs and other explosives, but also bringing in intelligence collectors, special operators and even full combat troops.”

Arkin reveals that the Northern Command is “already working under the far-reaching authority that goes with ‘extraordinary operations.’” This includes the activation of a series of intelligence-gathering operations directed against the American people. These include:

* A decision by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to expand the mission of the Counterintelligence Field Activity (CIFA), established last year to protect “critical infrastructure,” authorizing it to maintain “a domestic law enforcement database that includes information related to potential terrorist threats directed against the Department of Defense.”

* The assigning of military special agents to 56 FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force operations at FBI field offices, investigating potential threats to the military in local communities inside the United States.

* The decision by Eberhart to transform Joint Task Force Six, a drug-enforcement unit of 160 soldiers at Ft. Bliss, Texas, into a counterterrorism force called Interagency Task Force North. Congress originally authorized joint Task Force Six in 1996, in the first exception to the Posse Comitatus Law, which bars the US military from assuming domestic police functions.

* The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, another little-

known body, is gathering an “urban data inventory” combining unclassified and classified data on 133 cities, as well as US border crossings and seaports, to create a national “spatial data infrastructure.” This information, which Arkin describes as “down to the house level,” could be used either for surveillance or military targeting.

According to Arkin, the CIFA has been given a domestic “data mining” mission as well: “figuring out a way to process massive sets of public records, intercepted communications, credit card accounts, etc., to find ‘actionable intelligence.’” This amounts to reviving in another form the Total Information Awareness program, headed by Admiral John Poindexter of Iran-Contra fame, which was supposedly shut down earlier this year by Congress after a public outcry.

Arkin concludes: “Outside the view of most of the public, the government is daily expanding military operations into areas of local government and law enforcement that historically have been off-limits. And it doesn’t seem far-fetched to imagine that those charged with assembling ‘actionable intelligence’ will slowly start combining databases of known terrorists with seemingly innocuous lists of contributors to charities or causes, that membership lists for activist organizations will be folded in, that names and personal data of anti-globalization protesters will be run through the ‘data mine.’ After all, the mission of Northern Command and other Pentagon agencies is to identify groups and individuals who could potentially pose threats to Defense Department and civilian installations.”

Here, then, is a glimpse of the real state of affairs in the United States on the eve of the 2004 election year. Ruling circles widely anticipate a massive terrorist strike that would boost the flagging political standing of the Bush administration or even lead to a suspension of the elections and the establishment of military rule. The US military is actively preparing for this possibility by readying troops for use in domestic policing and by assembling a database of likely political opponents.

The obvious question is: given the expected consequences, is it not in the political interests of the Bush administration or sections of the military/intelligence apparatus to engineer such a terrorist attack? Or at least to insure that it takes place, by looking the other way, on the model of September 11?



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