

Ashcroft, Mueller press conference: sowing panic to prepare a provocation

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The ostensible purpose of the extraordinary press conference held Wednesday by Attorney General John Ashcroft and FBI Director Robert Mueller was to alert the American people to the danger of an imminent terrorist attack. But neither of the two officials could cite a single piece of evidence to substantiate their claim that such an attack was in the offing, or even explain why they had called the press conference in the first place.

Ashcroft began by declaring that “credible intelligence from multiple sources” indicated that “Al Qaeda plans to attempt an attack on the United States in the next few months”. He and Mueller pointed to next month’s G-8 summit in Georgia and this summer’s Democratic and Republican conventions as possible targets. But they failed to cite a single specific source for their conclusion that an attack was highly likely. They acknowledged, under questioning from reporters, that they had no idea where, when or how the attack would be launched.

They gave out the names and displayed photos of seven individuals who, they asserted, were linked to Al Qaeda and involved in plots against the American homeland. But, they had to admit, they did not know whether any of these people were currently in the US. In fact, they had no knowledge of the whereabouts of any of the seven. Nor did they, in Mueller’s words, “have any reason at this time to believe that they are working in concert”.

US authorities had publicly released the names of six of the alleged terrorists months ago. The only new name was that of a 25-year-old US citizen—Adam Yahye Gadahn, aka Adam Pearlman—who reportedly was raised in California and converted to Islam. But when asked by a reporter for more details about the alleged Al Qaeda operative, both Ashcroft and Mueller were at a loss.

Reporter: “When did he convert to Islam, by whom, where did he grow up in the US?”

Ashcroft: “I cannot. But it may be that the director wants to provide more information.”

Mueller: “The West Coast, grew up on the West Coast, converted to Islam fairly—in his youth. And that’s about as far as I can go right now.”

Even more astonishing was Mueller’s response to a query about possible criminal charges against Gadahn.

“We would evaluate the evidence to determine whether or not charges are appropriate,” he replied.

In other words, the Justice Department and FBI had called a

press conference to urge all Americans to be on the lookout for Gadahn and the other six, who Ashcroft described as armed and dangerous, but lacked sufficient evidence to even charge the 25-year-old with a crime!

There was nothing exceptional about this particular absurdity. The press conference abounded in them. When a reporter asked Ashcroft whether he was asking specific cities to take greater security measures, the attorney general, in his desperation to obscure the fact that his terror alert was not based on any new or specific intelligence, was reduced to babbling:

“Well, this is intelligence that is developing intelligence... I think it is fair to say that this is intelligence that has come in over time. So this isn’t a one shot or other thing...I think it’s fair to say that we do not have intelligence that leads up to a specific location in regard to this threat which we see this summer and fall.”

An example of the “evidence” cited by Ashcroft in his opening remarks is the following assertion: “Intelligence *suggests* that ideal Al Qaeda operatives *may* now be in their late 20s or early 30s and *may* travel with a family to lower their profile.” (Emphasis added). Such was the substance behind the warnings of impending catastrophe.

Having issued their dire alert, what did the two top US police officials propose that people do? Mueller advised them to “remain vigilant” and report any “suspicious activities” to the local police or FBI. Aside from an injunction to spy on one’s neighbors—especially if they are Arabs or Muslims—it is impossible to make sense of this counsel.

All in all, it was a bizarre event. It appeared to have been thrown together not because of an external threat, but rather in response to the internal crisis of the Bush administration and the entire US state apparatus. This makes it all the more sinister. The saying, “Desperate men resort to desperate deeds” pertains.

Why was the press conference called now? It was not prompted by new information. Tom Ridge, the head of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), appeared Wednesday morning on a number of TV programs and said there was no reason to raise the official terror threat level, and a spokesperson for the DHS said, “describing Al Qaeda’s desire to harm the United States, this is nothing new”.

The evening news on ABC TV carried clips of the police chiefs of Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles declaring that they had no information of an increased threat. “All old stuff,” “hyperbole,” and “old pictures” were among their remarks.

There were even expressions of skepticism from within the Bush administration. One administration official, who spoke to the *New York Times* on the condition of anonymity, said, "There's no real new intelligence, and a lot of this has been out there already. There really is no significant change that would require us to change the alert level of the country."

Mr. Bush, the White House said, would not alter his schedule because of security concerns. Only two days before the Ashcroft-Mueller press conference, Bush had made a prime-time televised speech on the Iraq war in which he sought to defend the US occupation on the grounds of the post-9/11 "war on terror." In the course of a 32-minute speech, he uttered the words "terror," "terrorist" or "terrorism" 19 times. Yet, he made no mention of an imminent Al Qaeda attack on the US.

A far more plausible explanation for the press conference is the raging political crisis of the Bush administration and the increasingly open and brutal conflict between warring factions within all branches of the US state.

The growing debacle for American imperialism in Iraq, combined with an increasingly fragile and dangerous economic situation, has undermined the confidence of significant sections of the ruling elite in the Bush administration. Differences on policy, both foreign and domestic, anger within the military over the incompetence of Bush, Cheney and the civilian leadership of the Pentagon, long-simmering disputes between the CIA, State Department and Pentagon are converging to produce a toxic atmosphere within the highest levels of the state apparatus.

Mounting popular opposition to the Iraq war and the Bush administration is being registered in opinion polls that report sharply declining approval ratings for the incumbent, only six months away from the 2004 election.

The political and media establishment is awash with discussions over the electoral implications of a terrorist attack before Election Day. The possibility—or likelihood—of such an event is "in the air". Bush administration spokesmen are openly speculating on the impact of a major terrorist incident, and concluding that it could only help Bush's chances. (See "More 'Washington whispers' about possible pre-election terrorist attack").

Under these conditions, there can be no doubt that Wednesday's press conference was a calculated bid to foment an atmosphere of fear and panic.

One purpose is to cover up the disarray and incompetence of the government in general, and the Justice Department and FBI in particular. Only last month the then-acting director of the FBI appeared before the panel investigating the September 11 attacks and testified that Ashcroft had displayed utter indifference to the mounting signs of an impending terrorist act in the months preceding the hijack-bombings.

And just two days before the press conference, the FBI was forced to admit that it had wrongly named a Portland, Oregon lawyer, Brandon Mayfield, as an accomplice in the March 11 train bombings in Madrid, Spain. On the basis of a false fingerprint match, the FBI had arrested the lawyer and kept him in jail for two weeks on a material witness warrant.

The Mayfield fiasco highlighted the illegal and unconstitutional methods that have routinely been employed by the Justice

Department and FBI, in the name of the "war on terror," since 9/11.

The more ominous purpose is to lay the groundwork for a traumatic event that will result in the elections being held in an atmosphere of fear. Ashcroft, Mueller, Bush, Cheney and company are looking and even hoping for a terrorist event that will enable them to stampede public opinion behind Bush. Or, if the prospects for success on this basis appear dim, suspend the elections altogether.

This, after all, is the same gang that employed lies to drag the country into war, and demonstrated, in the aftermath of 9/11, its readiness to use the threat of terrorism to advance its reactionary political agenda. This criminal political element is quite capable of allowing, or even facilitating, a terrorist attack to hold onto power.

One thing that clearly emerged from Wednesday's press conference was the intention of the Bush administration to intensify its attacks on democratic rights in the run-up to the elections. Ashcroft and Mueller announced that they would begin a new round of "interviews" of targeted individuals, ostensibly to extract intelligence about terrorist plots. This means new round-ups, primarily of Arabs and Muslims, similar to the sweeps that were carried out after 9/11 and prior to the launching of the Iraq invasion.

And in a chilling statement that points to a further assault on civil liberties, Ashcroft said: "May I be clear on this: We seek unprecedented levels of cooperation with state and local law enforcement in collecting intelligence..." Decoded, this means a vast expansion of wiretaps, search and seizures, and all other forms of domestic spying.

These developments fully confirm the warning issued by the Socialist Equality Party in our 2004 election statement, where we wrote:

"Bush's decision to stake his political survival on his self-proclaimed role as a 'war president' has the most ominous implications for the American people. There is no reason to assume that the Bush administration will willingly give up office, no matter what the popular sentiment. There is a real danger that, in the course of the 2004 campaign, the current administration will permit, or even engineer, a new and devastating terrorist attack within the United States, especially if Bush's electoral fortunes take a turn for the worse. There have already been hints in the US media that in the event of such an attack, the November 2 election could be postponed or canceled outright, or held under conditions of martial law."

The greatest danger of a terrorist attack is not external. Rather, it stems from the provocations being prepared by sections of the American ruling elite and its state apparatus.



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