

Bush administration takes steps to cancel US election

The Socialist Equality Party
13 July 2004

The request by Bush administration officials for a detailed analysis of the legal steps that would be necessary to postpone the 2004 election represents an implicit threat to abrogate the US Constitution, dispense with democratic rights, and establish a dictatorship based on the military and police. This is the desperate action of a deeply discredited and unpopular regime that fears, not merely electoral defeat, but an explosion of social and political unrest in the United States.

The request was made public Sunday by *Newsweek* magazine, which reported that three federal agencies are already involved: the newly established Election Assistance Commission, which first suggested the possibility, the Department of Homeland Security, which has been issuing repeated but entirely unsubstantiated warnings about election-related terrorist threats, and the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel, which is now studying the legal and constitutional issues at the request of Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge.

The chairman of the Election Assistance Commission, DeForest Soaries, sent a letter to the Republican and Democratic leaders of both houses of Congress Monday, pointing to the absence of any legal or constitutional provision for postponing a national election. "There does not appear to be a clear process in place to suspend or reschedule voting during an election if there is a major terrorist attack," he wrote.

The Socialist Equality Party rejects as a bald-faced lie the claim that preparations to delay the election are necessitated by the possibility of a terrorist attack. Just as the terrorist threat was invoked to justify the illegal invasion of Iraq, it is being used to legitimize extreme anti-democratic measures that have been part of the Bush administration's secret agenda since it took office after the successful theft of the 2000 presidential election.

Nothing this administration says about the so-called "terrorist threat" deserves any credibility. The fact that it systematically lied about the supposed security threat posed by Iraq and its so-called "weapons of mass destruction" has been irrefutably established by the report issued last week by the Senate Intelligence Committee. The Bush administration consists of people, from the president and vice president on down, who will say anything to justify their criminal political and military actions.

The Bush administration also consists of desperate and dangerous men who are prepared *to do anything* to maintain their grip on power. To the extent that there does exist the danger of a terrorist episode prior to the November election, its planners and perpetrators are far more likely to be extreme right-wing provocateurs with connections to the Bush administration and various police and intelligence agencies than members of some secret Al Qaeda cell operating in the United States.

Now that the Bush administration has let it be known that it is laying the foundations for the postponement and cancellation of the elections in the event of a terrorist attack, it has, at the very least, provided a political motive and encouragement for such an act by neo-fascistic elements among its supporters who are not prepared to accept the defeat of this administration in the upcoming national election.

Even if one were to accept the possibility that a terrorist incident might be staged by Al Qaeda, this would in no way justify the postponement of a national election, a decision for which there is no precedent in the 216 years since George Washington was elected to the presidency. National elections were held on schedule during World War I, World War II, and even during the Civil War, when combat was raging in a dozen states. Even in the War of 1812, when Washington DC was overrun by the British and the White House was burned down, there was no move by the government to suspend elections.

No clear explanation has been given as to why a terrorist attack, were it to take place, would require the postponement of the November election. Rather, there have been references to the impact of the Madrid bombing on the recent Spanish election, which led to the ouster of the right-wing pro-war government. The unstated but obvious premise underlying these references is that the election should be postponed or cancelled in the aftermath of a terrorist incident because the people might vote the "wrong" way, i.e., as they did in Spain.

It is not the threat of an externally-inspired terrorist attack that is motivating the preparations of the Bush administration for a postponement of the November elections. The real reason for this unprecedented threat to democratic rights is to be found in the internal social conflicts and contradictions of American society. The fact that the government is clearly considering the cancellation of the presidential election means that the whole framework of American bourgeois democracy has arrived not merely at a political crossroad, but at an historical impasse.

As the bloody history of the twentieth century so often demonstrated, the transition from bourgeois democracy to various forms of police-military dictatorship and even fascism begins at the point when social antagonisms and conflicts within a given society have become so acute that they cannot be resolved within the framework of the traditional constitutional set-up. Such a situation now exists within the United States, where the social chasm between the super-wealthy elite and the broad mass of the working population is wider and deeper than in any other advanced capitalist country.

The threat to cancel the elections must be seen within the context of the recent political history of the United States, which has been characterized by escalating attacks on traditional democratic norms. A central aspect of this period has been the takeover of the Republican Party by fascist-minded elements who regard the electoral process itself as an intolerable hindrance to their plans for removing all restraints on the accumulation of private wealth at home and the worldwide extension of American military power. It is impossible to carry out such policies democratically, even under conditions where the only officially recognized opposition comes from a flaccid, toothless Democratic Party that is just as committed to the defense of the profit system and the interests of the corporate elite.

From the mid-1990s on, the extreme right has worked systematically, first to undermine and oust the Clinton administration, through the Starr investigation and the subsequent impeachment and Senate trial of Clinton,

and then to hijack the 2000 election, culminating in the intervention of the Supreme Court in the Florida crisis.

This has now reached the point of open discussion of plans for the suspension of the 2004 elections. No one should be mistaken about what is intended: the postponement of the 2004 vote means the cancellation of the elections and the entrenchment of George W. Bush in the White House for an indefinite period of time.

The progression is striking and unmistakable: first, the subversion of an elected president; then, the installation of an unelected president who lost the popular vote; now, the effort to forestall any vote at all, through what amounts to a Washington coup d'état.

The threat to close down the 2004 election is the culmination of all the repressive measures adopted by the Bush administration, using the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 as a pretext: the passage of the Patriot Act, the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, the creation of the Northern Command (the first-ever centralized military command controlling all troops in the continental US), the creation of a worldwide network of concentration camps for prisoners seized by the US military and CIA, the use of torture in these camps and in military prisons in Iraq, and the constant pressure on the courts—now packed with hundreds of Bush appointees—to ratify ever more drastic infringements on civil liberties.

The Office of Legal Counsel (OLC), which is now reviewing the constitutional and legal provisions required to order suspension of the elections, is the same agency that two years ago drafted a 50-page memorandum justifying the use of torture against prisoners detained in the Bush administration's "war on terror." The OLC declared that as "commander in chief," the president had essentially dictatorial war-time powers. He was above the law and could not be constrained either by the courts or by laws passed by Congress.

There is no doubt that the preparations involve more than just legal analysis. Active contingency planning involving an array of federal police agencies is under way.

Two months ago, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), a unit of the Department of Homeland Security, conducted Forward Challenge '04, an exercise which mobilized 4,000 federal personnel at more than 100 secret sites, simulating the response to a terrorist attack on Washington. FEMA has long been the lead agency in preparations for mass internal repression in the US, going back to the Reagan-era plan, code-named Operation Rex '84, to round up hundreds of thousands of Central American immigrants and antiwar activists in the event of a US war against Nicaragua.

The *Newsweek* article was clearly the result of a deliberate leak by the Bush administration, carried out to test public and media reaction to the possible cancellation of the election. The author of the brief report was Michael Isikoff, who played a key role in the Lewinsky affair, serving as a go-between connecting Linda Tripp, who taped Lewinsky's conversations about her relations with Clinton, and the office of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr.

At least one leading congressional Republican, Representative Christopher Cox of California, responded favorably, treating it as a purely technical question. In a television interview Sunday night, he pointed out that New York City officials had canceled primary elections scheduled to take place on September 11, 2001, and then rescheduled them.

"There isn't anybody that has that authority to do that for federal elections, so what Secretary Ridge has asked the Justice Department to do is, give me a legal memo, tell me what will be necessary. Do we need to go to Congress and get legislation?"

The response thus far by the Democratic Party and the media is highly significant. The media has downplayed the story, with newspaper coverage limited to brief wire service dispatches that were not even carried in major papers like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

Television news coverage has been perfunctory, treating the extraordinary request as routine worst-case contingency planning—a bureaucratic exercise with no political significance.

In the course of an interview with CNN, Bush's national security adviser Condoleezza Rice went through an apparently rehearsed exchange with anchorman Wolf Blitzer, who asked her about the *Newsweek* report. After Rice declared that the Bush administration had "no intention" of suspending the November election, Blitzer moved on to other subjects.

The Kerry-Edwards campaign had no official reaction to the suggestion that its electoral efforts might be rendered moot in the event of a terrorist "incident," real or manufactured. Kerry reportedly claimed it was "too early" to make any comment.

Leading congressional Democrats also made low-key remarks. Rep. Edward Markey of Massachusetts, a member of the House Homeland Security Committee, said that while it would be better to prevent a pre-election terrorist attack, planning for such an event would pay dividends.

These responses vindicate the warning made by the Socialist Equality Party in December 2000, after the Democratic Party capitulation to the Supreme Court decision in *Bush v. Gore*: there does not exist any significant constituency for the defense of democratic rights within the ruling elite. It sees democracy as a threat to its wealth and privileges.

Barely two months ago, the SEP discussed the danger of an anti-democratic provocation in the 2004 election process. In our election statement entitled "Support the Socialist Equality Party in the 2004 US elections," posted April 28, 2004, we warned:

"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."

Nothing could be more dangerous than complacency. The postponement—that is, the cancellation—of an election is not a technical matter. It would be as significant to the fate of American democracy as Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon was to the Roman Republic. It would represent a point of no return, the definitive break with democratic norms and constitutional legality—that is, a turn to methods of police-state dictatorship and civil war.

The greatest danger lies in the lack of political awareness and preparation by the working class. This must be overcome through the fight to organize the working class as a politically independent force. The essential issue is the creation of a genuine political alternative to the Democrats and Republicans, the parties of the corporate and financial plutocracy. Herein lies the significance of the political campaign that is being conducted by the Socialist Equality Party in the 2004 election.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact