

The New York Times and the threat to cancel the November election

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It took the *New York Times* six days to respond editorially and publish more than a news brief on the revelation that the Bush administration had initiated internal discussions on the possible cancellation of the November presidential election.

Newsweek magazine broke the story on Sunday, July 11, revealing that the Homeland Security Department had requested a detailed analysis from the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel on the legal basis for postponing the elections in the event of a terrorist attack on or around Election Day.

Even the initiation of contingency planning for such an action clearly represented an ominous and unprecedented threat to the most basic democratic rights of the American people—especially coming from a government that had been installed through the suppression of votes and had seized on 9/11 as the pretext for launching wars, attacking civil liberties, and riding roughshod over the Constitutional system of checks and balances.

Nevertheless, the so-called “newspaper of record” remained essentially silent on the matter for nearly a week. What the *Times* finally did print, in its edition of Saturday, July 17, was a news story and editorial focusing on official disavowals of any intention of postponing the election. These pieces treated the entire question as an unfortunate, but not particularly significant, political gaucherie. As the headline of its editorial, “A Bad Idea, Rejected,” implied, the affair had been resolved, and there was nothing more to be said.

Behind the pose of bemused nonchalance was something quite different. The real attitude of the *Times* could be summed up as, “The least said, the better!”

Very little has been revealed about the Bush administration discussions on canceling the elections. What are the names and positions of those involved? What scenarios were discussed as the basis for calling off the elections? What would the disaster threshold be for such an extraordinary action? Under what mandate, and on the basis of what emergency powers, would the present government continue to rule?

None of this has been probed, but the *Times* has no interest in pursuing its own investigation and seeking to place the facts before the American people. On the contrary, its operating principle is to conceal the dangers and keep the people in the dark.

The very placement of its articles demonstrates this. The *Times* waited until Saturday, a slow news day, when its daily readership is presumably at its weekly low point, to go into print on the election threat. It inconspicuously buried its news article on page 10, and led with Justice Department denials that it had ever considered plans to delay the election. But the very facts the *Times* reported belied its attempt to present the question as a settled issue.

The article noted that the Justice Department denied having ever received a request from Homeland Security to look into the possibility of postponing the elections, while Homeland Security continued to insist it had made such a request. The *Times* passed over this stunning contradiction without comment.

The editorial contained even more glaring contradictions and non-sequiturs, raising more questions about the threat to the elections and the *Times*' own role than it answered. The newspaper wrote that it was “troubling” to hear reports during the week that the Bush administration was considering the possibility of postponing the November election in the event of a terrorist attack. It said DeForest Soaries, the chairman of the US Election Assistance Commission, had set off a “firestorm” by raising the issue.

Why then, in the face of such “troubling” developments and the consequent political “firestorm,” had the *New York Times* remained silent? Anyone who looked to the *Times* for news and political commentary would have known next to nothing about the matter.

Suggesting that the motives of those Bush administration officials involved were of the most innocent sort, the *Times* went on to say, “However well-meaning they may have been, the inquiries were greeted with cynicism.” The editorial cited the statements of National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Soaries denying any intention of postponing the elections, and declared: “It is good that the issue was raised now and resolved.”

With this combination of willful blindness, complacency and dishonesty, the *Times* declared the matter “resolved.” Really? What about the bizarre press conference held only days before *Newsweek* broke the story, at which Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge, citing as a precedent the March train bombings in Madrid, announced that Al Qaeda was in the “operational stage” of carrying out a terrorist attack on the United States aimed at disrupting the elections? What about the statements made last week by members of the Election Assistance Commission who said that individual states could, on their own, cancel the elections, or strip voters of the right to vote for president by having the presidential electors appointed by state legislatures?

The *Times*, by implication, accepted as good coin the most innocent, and least credible, explanation for the Bush administration's internal discussions on canceling the elections: namely, that they arose on the basis of sound “intelligence” gathered by the Homeland Security Department, the CIA, FBI and other agencies. This readiness to accept the word of Ridge and company was evidently unaffected by the conclusion reached by the Senate Intelligence Committee in its report released two weeks ago that all of the government's claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and close ties between Saddam Hussein

and Al Qaeda used to justify the invasion of Iraq were false.

Despite the mountain of evidence that the Bush administration lied about the Iraqi “threat” to the American people, that it secretly uses torture against alleged Iraqi insurgents and alleged terrorist captives, and despite its unexplained refusal to take steps to prevent the 9/11 attacks even though it had ample advance warning—the *Times* implies that any questioning of the government’s motives is illegitimate.

Those who run the newspaper know better. They know that the Bush administration is led by a gang of political criminals, who came to power illegitimately and have ruled by means of conspiracy and provocation. They cannot be blind to the fact that Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and company have no brief for democratic rights or the Constitution, and are capable of employing extra-legal methods to hold onto power.

Given the acute crisis of the Bush administration, the undeniable growth of mass antiwar sentiment, and the many indications, including the official opinion polls, that Bush’s reelection is in serious doubt, the danger of some kind of election-eve provocation is very real.

The editors of the *Times* are likewise well aware that the entire week when they were maintaining their discreet silence, the political establishment was embroiled in a furious debate over the moves of the Bush administration toward canceling the November election. The top personnel of the newspaper were very likely involved in efforts to extract from the Bush administration “plausible denials” that would enable the media to conceal from the people the conspiracies being hatched against their democratic rights.

The newspaper waited until the appropriate soporific denials had been made and the turmoil within the establishment had subsided to go into print and declare the matter “resolved.”

Such deliberate deception is nothing new for the *New York Times*. In March 2002, for example, when the *Washington Post* published a front-page exposé of the fact that the Bush administration had secretly established a “shadow government,” supposedly as a precaution against a nuclear terrorist attack on the US capital, the *Times* published only two perfunctory articles on the subject, and failed to make an editorial comment.

The Bush administration action—which remains in effect—constituted an unprecedented threat to democratic and constitutional procedures. By executive order, the White House set up a government-in-waiting, consisting of 100-150 unelected executive branch officials, who live in fortified bunkers in mountainous regions of the East Coast, serving 90-day rotations while holding themselves ready to assume full powers in the event of a nuclear attack on Washington.

No officials of the legislative or judicial branches are included, and neither the elected party leaders in Congress nor those in the constitutional line of succession to the presidency were even aware of the program’s existence.

This shadow government provides an indication of the type of regime that would emerge in the aftermath of a canceled election. It would be a dictatorship based on the military and the police.

The existence of this police-state-in-waiting underscores the fact that the internal government discussions about postponing or canceling elections have little to do with a potential terrorist attack. Were a massive attack on the scale of 9/11 to occur during the elections, it would obviously have highly disruptive ramifications—as would a major natural disaster. But no previous American government, including those that held power during two world wars and even through the Civil War, raised the possibility of a hostile

attack or some other calamity as justification for postponing or canceling a national election.

The use, moreover, of real or invented terrorist threats as the pretext for reactionary measures is hardly a novelty for the Bush administration. This government has, since 9/11, deliberately sought to create an atmosphere of fear and panic in order to justify its “war on terror” abroad and its onslaught on democratic rights at home, including the establishment of the Homeland Security Department and the passage of the Patriot Act.

Whether or not the administration actually seeks to disrupt or cancel the November election, it has set in motion a political initiative to create some kind of authority with the power to close down elections in the future. Already commentaries are appearing in major newspapers, including the *Washington Post*, calling for Congress to authorize the establishment of a bipartisan, “neutral” panel that will have the power to postpone or cancel a national election.

An appropriate analogy to the use of terrorism as the pretext for such a repudiation of democracy is the infamous Reichstag Fire of February, 1933. Hitler and the Nazis seized on the burning of the parliament building to create an atmosphere of hysteria and fear and push through parliament a law abrogating parliamentary procedures, revoking democratic rights, and establishing a police state in which Hitler exercised virtually unlimited powers. A congressional authorization to cancel a US election would be the modern, American equivalent of Hitler’s “Enabling Act” of March, 1933.

It is clear from the contemptible role of the *New York Times* in relation to the current conspiracy against the right of the people to vote, and the Bush administration’s offensive against democratic rights as a whole, that this erstwhile voice of American liberalism would do nothing to seriously oppose such a development. The dishonest and politically reactionary role of the *Times* underscores the collapse of liberalism and the lack of any serious commitment within the political establishment to the defense of democratic rights.

Those sections of the ruling elite represented by the *Times*, which look with foreboding at the ever more open moves to dismantle the traditional procedures of bourgeois democracy, fear above all the danger of a massive social and political reaction from below. They seek to restrain the most reactionary sections of the ruling class with appeals to reason and moderation, while doing their best to politically disarm the working people and prevent them from mobilizing against the capitalist class to defend their basic rights.



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