

Washington Post calls Bush moves to postpone US elections “appropriate”

Patrick Martin
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The major daily newspaper in the US capital has endorsed the Bush administration’s review of possible actions to suspend the 2004 elections in the event of a major terrorist attack inside the United States. The *Washington Post* published an editorial on July 14, headlined “Tuesday in November”, which presents the preparations initiated by the Department of Homeland Security as “useful” and “appropriate”, and casts them as a legitimate exercise in contingency planning.

The whole approach of the *Post* is saturated with contempt for those who are alarmed about the implications of such an action for American democracy. The newspaper dismisses such concerns as “a few suspicious, even hysterical reactions, and talk of stolen elections.” Even the length and positioning of the editorial—a brief four paragraphs, placed second on the page under a comment on the gay marriage amendment—were meant to convey that nothing monumental was under discussion.

While counseling caution, the *Post* editors do not express any principled objection to a decision to call off the elections. Instead, they devote the bulk of their abbreviated comment to advising the Bush administration on how to counteract those who are suspicious of its political motives. They urge that Congress, not the executive branch, take the lead, possibly by appointing a bipartisan commission headed by such figures as ex-senators Bob Dole and George Mitchell, to study the issue.

For all the sneering about “hysterical reactions”, the *Post* is clearly worried that the reports of plans to call off the election have touched a nerve in public opinion, despite efforts to downplay the significance of the issue by the Bush administration, the Democratic Party and the bulk of the media. (While the *Post* preaches complacency, for instance, the *New York Times* practices it. There has been no editorial comment on the subject from the *Times* and only a few brief reports in its news pages.)

Overall, the news reporting on this subject, by both the television networks and the daily newspapers, has been remarkably perfunctory. Far less attention has been paid to the open discussion of calling off the November 2 election—an event that would have incalculable consequences for American society—than to such trivialities as the debut of Bush’s daughters as participants in his reelection campaign.

There is a stark—but highly informative—contrast between the

media response to last week’s press conference by Tom Ridge, the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and its response to Ridge’s decision to investigate the possibility of calling off the election.

Ridge warned on July 8 that Al Qaeda terrorists were planning attacks aimed at the US elections, suggesting that the Democratic and Republican conventions and Election Day activities could be major targets. Ridge gave no details, provided no evidence and proposed no action except greater vigilance. The DHS did not even raise the threat level on its color-coded warning, which has become an object of widespread derision. Nonetheless, Ridge’s press conference received saturation coverage in the media. It was the lead on the television news and was reported in prominent front-page articles in most newspapers.

Three days later, *Newsweek* magazine revealed that DeForest Soaries, chairman of the Election Assistance Commission, had recommended to Ridge that the DHS investigate what legal authority would be required to suspend the elections in the event of a terrorist attack, and that Ridge had forwarded this inquiry to the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel. There was a brief wire service report on the *Newsweek* revelation, quoting noncommittal responses from congressional Republicans and Democrats, and similarly low-key coverage by the television networks.

Both incidents concerned the possibility of a terrorist attack in conjunction with the US elections, but they received vastly different media treatment. The reason is obvious—and sinister.

In the first case, the force *allegedly* aiming to disrupt the US elections is a foreign terrorist organization. In the second case, the force *admittedly* considering postponement of the US elections is the US government itself, acting through Bush appointees in the Justice Department, the Department of Homeland Security and the Election Assistance Commission.

The fundamental truth, which the corporate-controlled media seeks to suppress, is that the US government is a far greater threat to American democracy than Osama bin Laden. Al Qaeda is a small band of stateless terrorists who can murder innocent people, but are incapable of imposing their reactionary vision of an Islamic fundamentalist state even in the Middle East, let alone in the United States. The Bush administration,

however, directs the most powerful imperialist state, using its powers to attack the living standards and democratic rights of the American people while enriching the wealthy elite that constitutes Bush's principal social basis.

Under Bush, the US government has already conquered two formerly independent countries, subjecting 50 million people to the rule of American puppets. Now the outcome of Bush's self-proclaimed "war for freedom" in the Middle East is the open preparation for the suppression of democracy within the United States itself.

Such a course is fraught with enormous peril for the Bush administration and the US ruling class. They are operating, not from a position of strength, but from weakness: a deeply discredited government, an unpopular war, and an economy undermined by catastrophic budget and trade deficits, kept afloat only by an effusion of credit that is ultimately unsustainable.

The crisis of the Bush administration has produced a significant division within the ruling elite itself, reflected in the surge of financial contributions and relatively favorable media coverage for Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate, who has pledged to sustain and even intensify the US military effort in Iraq.

These divisions are reflected as well in editorials in a number of major daily newspapers, denouncing the Bush administration's preparations to postpone the elections, in some cases in scathing terms. These are staid bourgeois newspapers, conformist and "respectable" in their editorial views, most of them owned by giant media corporations. None can be said to be prone to "hysterical reactions" when it comes to criticism of the Bush administration. But they are concerned—and rightly so—that an attempt to call off the November election could produce a social and political explosion.

The *San Francisco Chronicle* published an editorial on July 12 headlined "Don't Even Think About It." The *Cleveland Plain-Dealer* declared, "This is a horrible idea. It should be stopped now. Today." The *Chicago Sun-Times* raised concerns about the longer-term precedent, asking "what security comes from pushing elections back two weeks or a month? What prevents terrorists from attacking again, and then what would we do? Keep postponing elections? That's a terrifying thought."

Even *USA Today*, flagship of the Gannett Co., the biggest US newspaper chain, expressed cautious disapproval of the postponement option, writing in an editorial on July 14, "If the US were trying to send a signal that terrorists had won, delaying a national election would certainly do the trick."

The *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* directly questioned the good faith of the Bush administration, observing: "given the vagueness of the intelligence on Al-Qaeda plans to date, one has to wonder why this particular contingency, over all those certainly being analyzed, was made public—and whether equal

and sufficient effort is being expended to make certain that the elections *do* take place on Election Day ... given the Florida shenanigans in 2000, voters should be forgiven for feeling skeptical upon hearing about this line of thinking."

Such editorials reflect serious concerns within the US ruling elite over the implications of a direct move to dictatorship, which is what any suspension of the elections would represent. Nevertheless, the refusal of the most influential media outlets at the center of American financial and political life—including the broadcast networks and such newspapers as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*—to either seriously report and critically investigate government moves to close down the elections, or forthrightly denounce them as a conspiracy against the democratic rights of the people—illustrates the profound and irreparable decay of American bourgeois democracy.

Even if the Bush administration is persuaded to desist from using terrorist threats as the pretext for calling off or disrupting the November election, the very fact that the issue of canceling elections has been raised, with little protest from within the political and media establishment, establishes the most dangerous precedent. There can be little doubt that, at the very least, measures will be taken, either under a second Bush administration or a Kerry presidency, to establish a legalistic cover for calling off elections in the future.

To view the editorials referred to above, see the links below:

Washington Post

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A48234-2004Jul13.html>

San Francisco Chronicle

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2004/07/13/EDGO37JFBC1.DTL>

Cleveland Plain Dealer

<http://www.cleveland.com/editorials/plaindealer/index.ssf?base/opinion/1089711182312790.xml>

Chicago Sun-Times

<http://www.suntimes.com/output/commentary/cst-edt-edits13.html>

USA Today

http://www.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2004-07-13-edit_x.htm

Minneapolis Star-Tribune

<http://www.startribune.com/stories/561/4872617.html>



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