

Media suppresses news of Bush's moves to cancel US elections

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14 July 2004

The American media has barely reported the revelation, first made public on Sunday by *Newsweek* magazine, that the Bush administration initiated discussions on the legal issues involved in postponing the 2004 elections. Both the broadcast and print media have treated this unprecedented threat to democratic rights as a minor story, meriting only the most perfunctory reportage and no editorial comment.

In this effort to keep the American people in the dark, the press has been aided by the Democratic Party, whose presidential candidate, Massachusetts Senator John Kerry, has issued no statement on the question. Nor has the Democratic National Committee, or any other official body of the Democratic Party, publicly spoken out on Bush administration moves to subvert the elections—an action that would signal the abrogation of the US Constitution and establishment of de facto dictatorial rule.

According to the scattered press reports that have appeared, the chairman of the Election Assistance Commission, DeForest Soaries, sent a letter on June 25 to Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge suggesting that the November election might be cancelled in the event of a terrorist attack, and urging Ridge to seek legal advice on such a move from the Justice Department. According to *Newsweek* and other press sources, Ridge then requested a detailed legal analysis from the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel.

On Monday, Soaries sent a letter to the Republican and Democratic leaders of both houses of Congress broaching the question of postponing the elections. He also sent copies of his June 25 letter to Ridge.

Since the news of these moves broke over the weekend, various Bush administration officials, including spokesmen for the Homeland Security Department and Soaries himself, have made statements downplaying internal discussions on suspending the elections. However, these statements do not, for the most part, directly deny that steps have been taken to postpone or cancel the elections on the pretext of an impending or actual terrorist attack.

On the contrary, some administration officials have suggested that individual states could close down the elections, or instruct state legislatures to directly appoint the electors who officially cast the votes in the Electoral College for US president and vice president. The latter course would strip the state's population of the right to vote for president.

This proposal is a revival of the position taken by the Bush campaign and the Republican Party, and endorsed by the right-wing faction on the US Supreme Court, during the 10-week crisis over the disputed outcome of the 2000 election in Florida. At that time, the Republicans declared that if a vote recount in the pivotal state went

against Bush, the Republican-controlled Florida legislature would disregard the popular vote and appoint pro-Bush electors. In the event, the Supreme Court intervened to halt the recount and install Bush in the White House.

While Soaries, following a Tuesday hearing in Washington of his commission, told reporters he “can’t conceive of any circumstances under which a presidential election could be postponed or canceled,” one of his commissioners, Ray Martinez, said he believed the Constitution gave states the power to reschedule presidential elections or even appoint electors directly in case of emergency.

Soaries, moreover, said his commission planned to meet with officials of the Department of Homeland Security next week to discuss how to handle an election-day attack. He added that his commission was, according to a Reuters dispatch, “gathering information from individual states to see if they had plans in place.”

These statements raise the possibility that Republican-controlled states, with the approval of the Bush administration, could preempt voting in order to swing the national result in Bush's favor, or create sufficient chaos to subvert the election as a whole.

The meager reportage in the press of these unprecedented and anti-democratic maneuvers has highlighted the official disavowals of government officials, without providing any detailed information of the actual content of discussions within the Bush administration. The major newspapers have not even commented on glaring inconsistencies and contradictions in the statements of various government officials. The intended effect is to deny the seriousness of the threat to democratic rights.

The coverage provided by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, two of the country's most influential newspapers, has typified the manner in which the media has suppressed the story. The *Post* did not even report the *Newsweek* revelation in its Monday editions. On Tuesday, it buried a brief reference to the issue in a story about statements made by Democratic Congressman Jim Turner of Texas debunking dire warnings from Ridge and other intelligence officials about Al Qaeda plans to attack the US for the purpose of disrupting the elections.

The *Post* reported that the Homeland Security Department denied having asked the Justice Department to review the legal questions involved in suspending the elections. The newspaper noted, without any further explanation, that it had published an article Monday afternoon on its web edition quoting a Homeland Security official saying that the department had, in fact, referred the legal issues to the Justice Department.

The *New York Times* published a four-sentence item on its web edition Monday, in which it likewise cited a Homeland Security

official as saying the department had, the previous week, referred the question of postponing the elections to the Justice Department. The *Times* quoted the official as saying postponing the elections would probably require an act of Congress and perhaps a constitutional amendment, and then adding, "But we're certainly looking into the issue very seriously."

On Tuesday morning, the *Times* web edition published a brief dispatch from the Associated Press under the headline "Rice: No Plan to Delay National Election." The story quoted National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice who, interviewed on CNN, said, "[W]e should have the elections on time."

Later on Tuesday the newspaper's web edition carried a Reuters story quoting Soaries, under the headline "November Elections Won't be Delayed, Official Says." The story included the statements of Martinez suggesting that individual states could halt the elections or have the presidential electors appointed by the state legislatures. The *Times* made no comment on Martinez's claims.

One other item posted on the *Times*' Tuesday web edition provided, inadvertently, a devastating exposure of the newspaper's decision to downplay what it knows to be a story of immense importance. Under the heading "Political Points," an item by Carl Hulse appeared bearing the headline "White House Tries to Calm Hubbub Over Vote Delay." The author, in a jocular tone, began by noting that "the idea of postponing the November elections was the talk of Capitol Hill Monday, where hundreds of politicians have thought of little else for the last year but making it to Nov. 2."

This raises an obvious question: if the revelations of discussions about postponing the elections were "the talk of Capitol Hill," why had the *Times* chosen to bury the story on its news pages and ignore it on its editorial pages?

The cynical and unserious attitude of the *Times* toward the right to vote was reflected in the concluding passage of Hulse's article: "But Democrats could not resist getting in a few digs at their opponents over the idea, with one comparing it to recent controversies in the House over extended floor votes. 'They will start the election on time,' said Rahm Emanuel of Illinois. 'They will just keep it open until they win.'"

Other newspapers followed suit, retailing uncritically statements from Bush administration officials denying any intention to postpone the November elections. *USA Today*, for example, carried an article Tuesday on its inside pages quoting Brian Roehrkasse, a spokesman for Tom Ridge, saying he was "unaware of any efforts to make plans for postponing the elections." The same article quoted a Justice Department official as saying his department "had not tackled the issue either."

These are half-truths and lies, which flatly contradict previous statements. They are nevertheless being accepted uncritically by a servile media. This readiness to swallow the government line comes in the aftermath of the Senate Intelligence Committee report exposing the fact that all of the claims of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and close ties between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda were false.

The notion that the Homeland Security Department had no involvement in discussions about postponing or canceling the elections is belied by the bizarre press conference held last week by Ridge, where he warned that Al Qaeda was in the "operational stage" of launching a terrorist attack aimed at disrupting the elections.

Ridge not only provided no evidence to support this claim, he admitted that the government had no specific intelligence of any such attack, and declined to raise the terrorist threat level from yellow to

orange. Is it mere coincidence that this performance came less than two weeks after Soaries sent his letter to Ridge suggesting that the elections be postponed under the pretext of a terrorist attack?

The *World Socialist Web Site* sought to contact the Department of Homeland Security, the Election Assistance Commission, and the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel in connection with the revelations concerning the November elections. None of these agencies returned our calls.

We also sought to contact the Kerry campaign headquarters and a number of prominent senators and congressmen, including such "liberal" Democrats as Hillary Clinton and Edward Kennedy. The only response we received was from a representative of independent Congressman Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who said the congressman had not made a formal statement, but "didn't think [postponing the elections] was a good thing."

The WWSW also sought to contact the ombudsmen of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* to obtain an explanation for the failure of these newspapers to seriously report, investigate or comment on the government moves to close down the elections.

On Tuesday, the WWSW received a reply from Daniel Okrent, the public editor at the *Times*. He sent an email stating that "the positions taken by the editorial board of The Times are not within my purview" and asserting that the editorial board was "entitled to its views." He concluded by saying he had forwarded our email to editorial page editor Gail Collins.

The dismissive attitude of the major media will only encourage those in the Bush administration and the political establishment who are determined to destroy the democratic rights of the people. A spokesman for the media watchdog Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) expressed astonishment and anger over the media coverage of the election delay issue.

Contacted by the WWSW, Steve Rendell, FAIR's senior analyst and co-host of the organization's national radio program "CounterSpin," said:

"We are surprised to see that this isn't a more urgent story. The White House has no power to suspend elections. After the whole recent history of god-awful intelligence, so we're now supposed to suspend a centerpiece of our democracy? They're not going to tell us what's behind the terror threats.

"To us [at FAIR] the outrage is that we're not seeing more reports questioning the right of the White House to have such authority. This is a White House that's made momentous decisions based on faulty intelligence and tried to keep the facts of those decisions secret, under wraps.

"In a healthy journalism culture this would have been a lead story. It's outrageous. I suppose if we're setting up Allawi as the leader in Iraq, maybe they're taking a cue from him. This begs so many journalistic questions. You're talking about martial law, a dictatorship."



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