

Terror scare paves way for police-state measures

The Editorial Board
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In the wake of Sunday's declaration of an "orange alert," unprecedented security measures have been implemented at key financial institutions in Washington, New York and Newark, New Jersey. Hundreds of heavily armed local and federal police have been deployed around the New York Stock Exchange and the Citicorp Center in Manhattan, the Prudential Financial building in Newark, and the World Bank and International Monetary Fund buildings in Washington.

Checkpoints have been set up where trucks and private vehicles are stopped and searched in random fashion—a violation of constitutional safeguards against arbitrary searches. Bridges and tunnels leading into New York have been closed to commercial traffic. Police armed with automatic weapons have been posted on downtown street corners and sent into subway stations, trains and buses, arbitrarily demanding identity proofs and going through people's belongings.

The terror alert has been used as the pretext for virtually walling off the Capitol building and its environs, even though no public institutions were named in Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge's Sunday announcement of the alert, and the Senate sergeant-at-arms acknowledged that the alleged intelligence prompting it contained no threat to the Capitol. A ring of 14 police checkpoints and concrete barriers has been set up around the Capitol, Senate office buildings, the Library of Congress and the Supreme Court.

The closure of an entire street near the Capitol, without any consultation with local officials, prompted Washington Mayor Anthony Williams to charge the federal government with transforming "the symbols of American freedom and democracy" into "fortresses of fear." His spokesman said, "It scares people. This is not Beirut."

Even the *Washington Post*, which has avidly supported the Bush administration's "anti-terror" measures and the war in Iraq, published an editorial Wednesday protesting that the barricading of the Capitol "makes a mockery of our claim to be a free and open society."

The *Post* reported that federal officials were considering further restrictions, this time around the White House and the Treasury Department, including limitations on truck traffic and the fencing off of sidewalks. Officials in both Washington and New York said the police measures would continue indefinitely.

These police-state procedures are being taken despite acknowledgments from Bush administration officials on Monday that the Al Qaeda surveillance of financial institutions cited by Ridge as the supposed basis for the terror alert occurred more than three years ago, well before the 9/11 attacks. Various officials admitted that the government had no information that the surveillance was continuing, and had no knowledge of a specific or current plot against any of the named sites.

Monday's revelations of the dated character of the purported intelligence prompted sections of the media—which uncritically parroted Ridge's initial claims—to give some expression to the widespread popular belief that the Bush administration concocted the terror alert for political reasons.

The government responded with new and more lurid claims, telling the *New York Times* Tuesday that, in addition to evidence of past surveillance of financial institutions, it had a "separate intelligence stream" pointing to a possible terrorist attack on financial institutions "in August or September." The *Times* quoted a "senior intelligence official" as saying, "Al Qaeda is moving toward the execution stage of attacks here in the homeland."

This was the sum total of the supposed new intelligence revealed to the *Times*, but on Wednesday the newspaper dutifully accepted the hollow claims of unnamed Homeland Security officials as good coin, turning them into a front-page lead story. The television networks took their cue from the *Times*, leading their evening news reports with dire threats of imminent Al Qaeda attacks.

The Socialist Equality Party entirely opposes all of the "security" measures imposed in the wake of Ridge's terror alert, and gives no credence to the amorphous and unsubstantiated "threats" that have allegedly prompted their implementation. It is abundantly clear that the motive for the terror alert is political. It is calculated to promote the reelection of George Bush and ensure that the November election is held in an atmosphere of fear.

Over the past several months, as the situation facing the US in Iraq has deteriorated and the crisis of the administration intensified, raising the prospect that Bush could lose the 2004 election, government officials have mounted a relentless propaganda campaign on the theme of a terrorist attack occurring on or near election day. Less than a month ago, the administration leaked reports to the press that it was conducting internal discussions on the possibility of canceling the elections outright in the event of a terrorist act.

The new terror hysteria being mounted by the government and the media must serve as a warning that the danger of an election-period provocation is very real. The aim would be either to stampee the voters into reelecting Bush, or close down the election altogether.

It is instructive to review the events of the past month. On July 8, Ridge held a bizarre news conference in which he declared that an Al Qaeda attack aimed at "disrupting the democratic process" was in "the operational stage." As usual, Ridge presented no evidence to substantiate this claim. Notwithstanding the lurid content of his warnings, he declined to raise the terror alert from yellow to orange.

The media adopted a largely skeptical attitude toward Ridge's announcement. Three days later, *Newsweek* magazine reported that

Homeland Security and Justice Department officials were discussing the legal basis for canceling the elections. The response of the major news outlets was to downplay the story and denounce those who raised the obvious dictatorial implications of such discussions, while cautioning the administration against any attempt to close down the election. Later that month, the House of Representatives passed a unanimous resolution opposing any postponement or cancellation of the November election.

With this latest terror warning, the administration has upped the ante, concocting an even more shocking threat and implementing sweeping police-state measures in New York, New Jersey and Washington.

Anyone who denies that the Bush administration is capable of using the threat of terrorism to manipulate, and even cancel, the November election—such as Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman, who declared such suspicions “madness”—is himself ignoring the plain facts. What, after all, was the invasion of Iraq, but a cynical and calculated use of the terrorist threat, employing outright lies, to drag the country into war?

Ridge himself used his Sunday announcement to campaign for Bush’s reelection, declaring that the intelligence ostensibly prompting the terror alert was obtained only because of “the President’s leadership in the war against terror.” On Tuesday, at a press conference held at the Citicorp Center in Manhattan, Ridge once again raised the specter of a terror attack aimed at disrupting the elections.

The Bush administration is a criminal government, whose leading personnel, from Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney on down, have no allegiance to democratic procedures. They are prepared to say and do anything to hold onto power.

The police cordon that has been set up around the Capitol is entirely consistent with a conspiracy to stage a provocation on or near election day, and facilitate unilateral and extra-constitutional measures by the executive branch, without any debate or consent by Congress. The measures that have been taken are calculated to intimidate not only the general public, but the congressmen and senators as well.

The administration’s arguments justifying the wholesale abrogation of civil liberties are by no means limited to an emergency response to an immediate threat. If actions that occurred more than three years ago can be used to turn the country’s financial and political centers into no-go zones, then the imposition of police-state measures is not conditional on any imminent danger.

The Democratic Party and its presidential candidate, John Kerry, have backed the terror scare. Kerry brusquely disassociated himself from the remarks of former Vermont governor Howard Dean, who charged on Sunday that the Bush administration had concocted the terror alert to overshadow the just-completed Democratic convention and play up the one issue that, according to opinion polls, favors the current administration—its supposed leadership in the war against terrorism. A spokesman for Kerry said the Democratic candidate did not question Ridge’s motives and supported the security measures. Kerry’s only criticism was that Bush had not acted more quickly and decisively in the “war on terror.”

Ridge’s naming of financial institutions as the ostensible targets in his Sunday announcement—as well as the decision of the corporate-controlled media to fully embrace it—points to immediate concerns underlying the latest terror scare. Corporate and banking circles see mounting signs of an extraordinarily dangerous economic and financial crisis. The record rise in oil prices, in particular, has raised

fears of a highly destabilizing financial situation, with all of the explosive social implications of a sharp rise in prices and collapse of the superficial “recovery.” This has imparted a new element of crisis to an election already fraught with political and social tensions.

It should be recalled that in 1973-74, when OPEC quadrupled petroleum prices at the time of the Yom Kipur war between Israel and the Arab countries, the government of Edward Heath responded by posting troops at Heathrow airport outside of London. It was subsequently revealed that there were discussions at the time within the British state of overriding democratic procedures and imposing martial law.

The near-term consideration behind the latest terror alert is the attempt by Bush and company to manipulate the election in order to boost their chances against their Democratic competitors. But there are more fundamental considerations, which are shared by both parties. Kerry and the Democrats are neither able nor willing to oppose the police-state measures of the Bush administration because they are mounting the most right-wing Democratic campaign in modern history. They have fully signed onto the “war on terrorism,” and are seeking to outflank Bush by promoting Kerry’s military credentials and presenting him as a more effective and ruthless commander-in-chief.

What is involved here is the complete militarization of American society. It is dictated by the interests and aims of the US ruling elite represented by both parties, whatever their tactical differences. US imperialism, driven by the mounting contradictions of American and world capitalism, is engaged in a drive for global hegemony, and nothing, including the democratic rights and living standards of the American working class, must be allowed to stand in the way.

With the collaboration of the corporate-controlled media, the financial oligarchy and its political agents are conditioning the American people for the destruction of civil liberties and the transition to dictatorial forms of rule. They are setting the stage for unprecedented state violence and repression.



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