

New York Times offers Bush friendly advice on terror alerts

David Walsh
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The editorial response of the *New York Times* to the police-state measures imposed this week in New York City, Washington and Newark (“The Terror Alerts,” published in the August 5 edition of the *Times*) is thoroughly dishonest and disingenuous. The *Times* remains silent on the repressive and sinister character of the actions taken by the authorities, accepts as good coin the Bush administration’s lurid claims of an impending attack, and offers fraternal advice as to how the domestic “war on terror” might be more adroitly conducted.

It is necessary to place the appearance of this editorial within the context of the events unfolding in New York City this past week. Hundreds of “black-clad police armed with assault rifles,” as one press account had it, took up positions in and around key financial institutions in downtown and midtown Manhattan. At police checkpoints, trucks and private vehicles were stopped and searched in random fashion. Truck traffic was banned from certain bridges and tunnels leading into Manhattan.

Police closed off streets surrounding Grand Central Terminal. Armed police were posted on street corners and dispatched to subway stations, trains and buses, randomly demanding identity proofs and going through people’s belongings.

Similar measures were taken in Washington, DC and Newark. Overnight, portions of these major US cities were put under something approaching martial law.

All of this was carried out, according to Homeland Security officials, on the basis of alleged surveillance of buildings by Al Qaeda operatives several years ago. They have admitted to having no serious evidence that the surveillance was pursued or that any attacks were actually planned. Given that the government admits to being entirely in the dark as to the terrorists’ supposed timetable, the measures could remain in effect indefinitely.

Broad layers of the population are skeptical about the government’s claims and angry over the militarization of their cities. They instinctively suspect that political calculations, in the first place, an attempt to influence the presidential election, play a central role in the Bush administration’s actions. They have not forgotten that the clique around Bush lied about the supposed terrorist threat from Iraq to justify an unprovoked war that has already cost nearly 1,000 American lives, tens of thousands of Iraqi lives, and some \$200 billion.

This sentiment is not shared by the *New York Times*. The editors of this leading newspaper are more than willing to accept as gospel truth the most lurid and unsubstantiated claims of Bush and

company.

Such an approach is the direct opposite of that which would be taken by a genuinely democratic press—which the *New York Times* in no way embodies. Such a newspaper would consider it an elementary responsibility to treat all government claims critically and uphold the interests of the people by exposing official lies and distortions.

The newspaper’s August 5 commentary begins with an expression of sympathy for the current resident of the White House: “Our lives have changed so much since Sept. 11, 2001. ... It’s been a tough adjustment for everyone, and the burden on President Bush is especially heavy.” How touching!

The newspaper continues in the same vein: “Given the unprecedented circumstances and the costs of making a mistake, it’s easy to understand why the administration has had so much trouble managing the way it informs the public about potential danger.”

These passages establish the central premise of the editorial: i.e., that the Bush administration is acting in good faith to protect the American people from a terrorist threat, but that it has—perhaps inevitably—taken certain missteps.

“The administration,” the editors assert, “was obviously right to warn the country that Al Qaeda had apparently studied financial institutions in three cities with the idea of a possible attack.” The use of the word “obviously” says everything, given that the government has not provided a shred of evidence that any such terror threat exists.

Just two months ago, the *Times* felt obliged to publish a public apology for its role in promoting the Bush administration’s claims about Iraq’s supposed stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction—the central pretext for invading and occupying the country. The newspaper’s editors admitted to having failed in their obligation to adopt a critical, independent and vigilant approach to such government assertions, and to undertake their own investigation before rubberstamping the government’s pre-war propaganda.

Adopting a pose of soul-searching repentance, the newspaper wrote: “We have found ...coverage that was not as rigorous as it should have been ... In some cases, the information that was controversial then, and seems questionable now, was insufficiently qualified or allowed to stand unchallenged. Looking back, we wish we had been more aggressive in re-examining the claims as new evidence emerged ...or failed to.”

Just how dishonest this mea culpa was is demonstrated by the newspaper's readiness to do precisely the same thing at the next turn of events.

The *Times*' method is cynical and transparent. At the outset the newspaper rules out the possibility that the administration has ulterior, anti-democratic and reactionary motives for its actions. Having excluded this—the most plausible—explanation, the editors proceed to give advice to what they portray as a well-intentioned, but somewhat bumbling government.

They write: "The Bush administration needs to come up with a method of communication that informs the public in a calm, clear way. Perhaps most important, people need to be made totally confident that this critical matter is not being tangled up in the presidential campaign."

The *Times* fails to explain the difficulty of such a task. They are silent because they know perfectly well that Bush is having trouble bamboozling the American people precisely because "this critical matter" is so obviously "tangled up in the presidential campaign."

The administration has no interest in communicating in a "calm, clear way" because the whole purpose of its terror scare is to sow the maximum panic and fear, while offering its dictatorial actions as the only possible deterrent to terrorism.

The *Times* continues with its pious wish-list: "There is nothing more important for Mr. Bush to do every day until Nov. 2 than to make it clear that he would never hype a terror alert to help his re-election chances. It is a challenge complicated by the fact that he is running on his record against terrorism and is using images of 9/11 and the threat of more attacks to promote his candidacy."

The above sentence is a gem of sophistry. The *Times* acknowledges that Bush is "using the threat of more attacks to promote his candidacy"—that is, exploiting a past tragedy to whip up fears of a future tragedy—and then pretends that such a president would never "hype a terror alert to help his re-election chances." Evidently the gentlemen and ladies of the *Times* have forgotten the stolen election of 2000, and all that has happened since.

Of course, they have not forgotten. Rather, in covering for the criminal methods of the Bush administration, they are seeking to cover up their own complicity, including their insistence on the "legitimacy" of a president installed through the suppression of votes and the diktat of a right-wing cabal on the Supreme Court.

The editors continue: "The president's credibility on national security issues was gravely wounded by the way he misled Americans, intentionally or not, about the reasons for invading Iraq—including the suggestion that the war was part of the campaign against Al Qaeda."

The president's record of duping the population on the life-and-death question of going to war casts no shadow, in the eyes of the *Times*, on its present claims about terrorist threats and the need to militarize American cities. After all, Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Powell and company may have been lying "unintentionally."

The editorial concludes: "We have learned since Sept. 11, 2001, to value every day in which nothing terrible happens as a gift and an opportunity. The Bush administration has been given the same blessing. Every morning the president and his deputies are challenged not only to renew their war against potential terrorists, but also to earn the confidence of the people they aim to protect."

Times editors' earlier acceptance of the claim¹³ about weapons of mass destruction and Iraq-Al Qaeda links was not a mistake, nor is their present position. While the editorial unctuously cozies up to the Bush administration, at the same time offering "constructive criticism" about how it might more effectively put its policies across, the *Times*'s news pages are full of unsubstantiated reports of "terror plots," providing a platform for "unnamed government officials" and "anonymous sources" in the CIA and the Homeland Security Department to terrify the public, assault democratic rights, manipulate the election and prepare the groundwork for new and bloodier wars.

Nor is the editorial's silence about the police-state operations in New York City and Washington a mistake. It should be noted that, according to the press, "Police closed streets surrounding Grand Central Terminal, including Vanderbilt Avenue between [East] 42nd and 45th streets and 43rd and 44th streets between Madison and Vanderbilt avenues." In other words, a critical part of Manhattan, only blocks from the *Times* headquarters on West 43rd Street, has been turned into a virtual no-go zone. The newspaper's editors and reporters no doubt observed or personally encountered the checkpoints, blocked-off streets and police armed with assault rifles.

Their refusal to denounce these measures can only connote approval. And this approval, in the final analysis, expresses the outlook of the social milieu to which the *Times* management belongs and for whom they speak: highly privileged layers of the upper-middle-class.

These sections of the population include those who have benefited financially—growing rich and very rich—from the assault on the working population over the past 25 years, the lowering of workers' living standards, the destruction of the social safety net, and the battery of tax cuts for the wealthy. They have reaped the benefits of cheap labor at home and imperialist super-exploitation abroad. These are "stock market" liberals, fixated on the value of their stock portfolios. For them, the destruction of democratic rights is an acceptable price to pay for keeping the anger and indignation of the broad masses at bay.



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