

Massive police presence for Bush inauguration

Jamie Chapman
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The second inauguration of George W. Bush will be held Thursday under a massive and pervasive police/military presence. The conditions of virtual martial law that are being imposed for the event bespeak more the coronation of a besieged autocrat than the swearing in of a democratically elected president.

Some 6,000 police are being deployed, backed by 7,000 troops who will be placed on alert. Sniper teams will be stationed on rooftops. Plainclothes specialists looking for chemical, biological or radiological agents will mingle through the crowd, carrying hand-held detectors. Twenty-two checkpoints will be set up to search spectators and screen them with metal detectors.

Police will not allow backpacks, packages, any bags larger than 8 inches by 6 inches by 4 inches, or thermoses and coolers of any size. Umbrellas will be prohibited so as to allow authorities a clear view of the crowd. Even miniature American flags that Bush supporters wanted to wave as the motorcade passed will be banned.

No poles or other supports will be permitted for signs or placards—a measure that cannot by any stretch of the imagination be justified on the grounds of a potential terrorist attack. Rather, it is aimed at inhibiting the constitutionally protected right of peaceful assembly and political expression.

Vehicles will be banned from more than 100 square blocks of downtown Washington DC. Residents of the area will have to submit to searches and show identification to get into their homes. Hotel and office parking garages in the vicinity will be inspected and closed.

Government workers will be sent home for the day. Those who stay in their offices along the parade route in an attempt to get a view of the proceedings will be

ordered away from windows.

The Federal Aviation Administration will impose a 23-mile radius no-fly zone around the three area airports. Coast guard boats will patrol the Potomac River, which runs through the city. DC police will weld shut manhole covers on nearby streets. Streetlights will also be removed.

Calling the inaugural “the most visible manifestation of our democracy,” outgoing Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge held a press conference last week to announce the security measures. In front of the media, he surrounded himself with federal law enforcement personnel, members of the military and local police chiefs. They were flanked by bomb-sniffing dogs and US Park police officers on horseback.

He also showed off mobile command centers belonging to the joint military command for Washington, the Secret Service, the Federal Protective Service, and the DC Emergency Management Agency. Combat-ready troops from the 3rd Infantry Regiment displayed M-4 assault rifles and night vision goggles.

Ridge declared, “Protective measures will be seen. There will be quite a few that are not seen. Our goal is that any attempt on the part of anyone or any group to disrupt the inaugural will be repelled by multiple layers of security.”

All of this is far more designed to intimidate the American population, discourage dissent and create an atmosphere of fear than to deter would-be terrorists. Ridge admitted that his department had no evidence of a specific terrorist threat against the inauguration, and that the “chatter” detected by Washington’s far-flung spy networks had receded.

When Ridge speaks about “disrupting the inaugural,” he is deliberately conflating in the public mind terrorist violence and political dissent. His description of an

inauguration held under such conditions as “the most visible manifestation of our democracy” is an apt, if unintentional, bit of irony. The lock-down of the city indeed expresses the debased and imperiled state of American democracy.

Protesters will be confined to a 200-foot patch along the parade route, which stretches several miles. Bush supporters have been allocated the rest of the bleacher space along Pennsylvania Avenue, at a cost of up to \$125 a seat.

One group of Bush opponents, concerned that they will not be allowed to hold up protest signs, plans to get its supporters to station themselves between the bleachers and express their dissent by turning their backs to Bush’s motorcade as it passes by. Another group will stage a “die-in” in Lafayette Park across from the White House, with over 1,000 cardboard coffins symbolizing the American troops killed in Iraq.

Such protests are but a pale reflection of the actual opposition within the population to Bush’s policies of war and social reaction. Notwithstanding Bush’s claim to have won a mandate for his policies from the electorate, his moves to militarize the nation’s capital reflect the enormous social and political crisis gripping the US.



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