

US Marshals, local police stage nationwide mass arrests

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In a massive dragnet, US Marshals led more than 90 state, local and other federal police agencies last week in arresting over 10,000 people across the country on outstanding warrants, the Justice Department revealed Thursday.

Code-named Operation Falcon, for Federal and Local Cops Organized Nationally, the unprecedented federally-coordinated mass arrests were staged for maximum political and media impact. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales used the operation as the subject of his first news conference since the confirmation of his controversial nomination.

The Justice Department, meanwhile, supplied the television networks government-shot action videotape of Marshals and local cops raiding homes and breaking down doors. The footage was aired on news programs, accompanied by commentary that uncritically parroted the claims made by the department.

The department produced a mind-numbing array of statistics on the raids, resulting in cookie-cutter articles appearing in local papers and on local television throughout the country, highlighting the number of arrests made in each area.

The political purpose of the dragnet was underscored by the fact that law enforcement officials privately acknowledged that most of those arrested in the nationwide raids would have been picked up in any case in the course of normal police work.

The piling up of massive arrest numbers in a brief seven-day period was made possible through an expenditure of \$900,000 from the US Marshals Service budget and the use of overtime to quadruple its personnel assigned to pursuing fugitives. Quantity, not quality, was clearly the objective.

While US authorities highlighted the apprehension of 160 murder suspects and 550 sexual assault suspects, it appeared that by far the largest share of those arrested

were minor drug offenders. Narcotics violations accounted for fully 4,300 out of the 10,340 arrests.

In several areas of the country, authorities reported that the raids filled local jails to overflowing.

“We generally try to focus our resources on the baddest of the bad. We’re going after murderers, rapists, that kind of thing,” Deputy US Marshal Ricardo Guzman told the *Washington Post*. “On the average day, we can’t do every carjacker or person wanted on failure to pay child support.”

But last week, the government changed these priorities. “We decided to get as many as we can,” he said. “We put everybody on the street with a stack of warrants and said, ‘Start knocking on doors.’”

Justice Department officials sought to link the mass arrests in the public mind to the “war on terrorism,” though none of those picked up are accused of terrorist acts. As one news report on the Washington press conference announcing the operation put it: “...officials said the exercise was an opportunity to show the benefits of cooperative law enforcement in an age of terrorism.”

Attorney General Gonzales told reporters, “Operation FALCON is an excellent example of President Bush’s direction and the Justice Department’s dedication to deal both with the terrorist threat and traditional violent crime.” He added, “This joint effort shows the commitment of our federal, state, and local partners to make our neighborhoods safer, and it has led to the highest number of arrests ever recorded for a single initiative of its kind.”

Ben Reyna, Director of the US Marshals Service, echoed Gonzales, declaring that the operation “produced the largest number of arrests ever recorded during a single initiative.”

Sections of the press have cynically attributed the operation to a bid by the US Marshals Service to wrest more money from Congress during Congress’ ongoing

budget deliberations. Yet, the high-profile role played by Gonzales in the announcement and the repeated invocation of terrorism suggest other, more ominous, motives.

The announcement comes barely one week after Gonzales went before the Senate Judiciary Committee to urge renewal of sections of the USA Patriot Act that are set to expire at the end of this year. In his press conference announcing the mass arrests, Gonzales made a point of stressing the need for legislative action to permanently sanction the “information sharing” and coordination of police agencies at all levels of government which, he claimed, made the operation possible. This was a thinly veiled rebuke to a number of congressmen and senators who have called for revisions in certain provisions of the Patriot Act.

In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the act was rammed through Congress without debate or any serious examination of its provisions. It granted unprecedented police powers to the federal government, vastly expanding its powers to spy on US citizens through warrantless searches, wiretaps and seizure of business, medical and even library records. The use of secret courts and secret evidence has been seen in a number of cases, including the FBI’s absolutely baseless and abortive frame-up of Oregon attorney Brandon Mayfield in connection with the Madrid train bombings.

Gonzales, who as President Bush’s White House counsel made the case for riding roughshod over the Geneva Conventions and allowing the torture of US-held detainees, is anxious to preserve the extraordinary and unconstitutional powers of search and seizure that the administration has arrogated to itself over the past three-and-a-half years.

Moreover, the police dragnet and congressional consideration of the Patriot Act have both unfolded in the context of a generalized assault on the US constitutional system of checks and balances and a drive to assert unprecedented power for the executive branch. In the final analysis, the organization of nationwide mass arrests is a raw exercise of this power.

Not surprisingly, not a single prominent Democrat has raised any question about the real purpose of the coordinated raids.

The media and local police officials throughout the country have repeated the claims of the Justice Department and the US Marshals Service that the recent arrests are the greatest number ever in a single operation. In point of fact, the numbers are roughly equivalent to

those achieved by one of Gonzales’s predecessors, Alexander Mitchell Palmer, who headed the Justice Department 85 years ago.

The infamous Palmer Raids, named after the then-attorney general, were launched on November 7, 1919, the second anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Further mass arrests were carried out in December and January. In one of them, FBI agents led local police and vigilantes in simultaneous raids in 70 cities, rounding up 4,000 people in a single night.

They smashed down the doors of union halls and offices of communist, socialist and anarchist organizations and dragged people from their beds without warrants or criminal charges. Foreign-born workers bore the brunt of the assault, as the government sought to blame a wave of mass strikes and radical protests on “alien sedition.” Several hundred foreign-born activists and workers were deported without the benefit of a hearing. Many more of those detained were subjected to brutal beatings.

The target of the arrests in Operation Falcon was not political opponents of the government, but rather people who missed court dates, violated parole and, at least in some fraction of the cases, are wanted for criminal acts of violence.

But the way in which these raids—portrayed as serving crime victims and making communities safer—are being used to bolster so-called “anti-terrorist” policies that are a major step toward a police state must serve as a serious warning.

This is an administration that has asserted the right of the US president to declare anyone—citizen and non-citizen alike—an “enemy combatant,” and lock him up indefinitely without charges, without the right to a public hearing or lawyer, and without even an official acknowledgement that the person has been thrown into prison.

Under these conditions, the question is posed: was Operation Falcon a dry run for a plan to be executed in the face of intensified political crisis or a resurgence of mass opposition to the government? Was this extraordinary federal, state and local coordination of mass arrests a dress rehearsal for a modern-day version of the Palmer Raids?



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