

US: the panicked evacuation of Capitol Hill

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Panic seized the US capital Wednesday and was transmitted in amplified form to the entire country via the broadcast airwaves. The cause was a light plane flown by two hapless pilots from rural Pennsylvania, who mistakenly strayed into the restricted airspace surrounding Washington DC.

In response, alarms sounded and gun-toting security agents cleared the Capitol Building, shouting orders to Congressmen and Senators to run, not walk, from the seat of the US legislature. Other security units herded justices from the Supreme Court.

Vice President Dick Cheney, meanwhile, was transferred by motorcade to an “undisclosed secure location.” For his part, President George W. Bush was not told about the incident until it was over. The Secret Service saw no need to interrupt his daily exercise routine, allowing him to finish a ride on his mountain bike in a Maryland park.

In the midst of the tumultuous evacuation of more than 35,000 people onto the streets of Washington, across the river in Virginia, the Pentagon’s operations remained unperturbed, with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld prepared to give the order to shoot down the errant plane. In the end, Air Force F-16 fighter jets escorted the plane to a nearby airfield.

The 45-minute episode marked the first time since the establishment of the Homeland Security Department’s color-coded terror alert system that the alert has raised to red, the highest level.

The mass media responded to the incident by invoking the memory of September 11. Having never seriously probed how and why 9/11 was allowed to take place, the media questioned whether or not the episode proved that Americans were “safer” now than before the attacks on New York and Washington

In a number of cases, television announcers asked with some indignation why the Air Force didn’t just shoot the plane down or suggested that the two pilots should be severely punished for prompting the mass evacuation.

As always, the essential questions posed by the incident

were not even suggested by the media, much less explored. Was this merely a reflex security measure, or were political calculations involved? And, what did the evacuation reveal about the state of American democracy?

This was hardly the first such incident; incursions of the restricted airspace near the White House and the Capitol Building are commonplace. In 1994, a suicidal pilot flew another Cessna aircraft into the White House, doing virtually no damage. At least 90 violations were recorded in the decade leading up to 9/11.

Since the September 11 attacks and the expansion of the restricted area, the number of violations has only increased. In June 2002, there was an incident virtually identical to the one that occurred Wednesday. A single-engine Cessna 182 came within four miles of the White House, and its pilot failed to respond when air traffic controllers tried to contact him on emergency frequencies.

In that instance, while reporters and some others were asked to leave the White House, the president stayed inside and there was no evacuation of other buildings, much less a media uproar.

According to an Associated Press story published at the time, “Dozens of similar White House airspace violations have occurred in recent weeks, officials said, without any noticeable consequences on the ground.”

In June of last year, there was one instance in which a similar evacuation of the US Capitol and the Supreme Court was executed. It came on the eve of Ronald Reagan’s funeral, when a two-engine turbo-prop plane carrying Kentucky Governor Ernie Fletcher to Washington for the ceremony failed to respond to ground controllers. Fighter jets and Blackhawk helicopters scrambled before the plane was identified and escorted to the Washington airport.

Curiously, though the incident involved what could have turned into the fatal shutdown of a sitting governor, the media’s response was far more low key than in Wednesday’s episode. Nor was there any announcement from the Homeland Security Department that the terror alert level had been raised to red.

What accounts for the atmosphere of hysteria this time around? The Bush administration has persistently sought to terrorize the American public into accepting its policies by invoking a supposedly omnipresent terrorist danger. Under conditions in which the administration confronts a rising tide of opposition to its militarist aggression abroad and attacks on social conditions at home, it is entirely probable that orders have been given to treat even the smallest incident as if it were a major terrorist attack.

The manner in which Wednesday's incident was dealt with has ominous implications for basic democratic rights and procedures in the United States.

Consider the *Washington Post's* account of the evacuation of the US Congress. Meetings were broken up by "barking...police officers who burst into Capitol rooms," the newspaper reports.

"House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) was literally lifted out of her pinkish high heels by Capitol Police in a hallway outside the House chamber" and bundled into a car to be driven away, the *Post* adds.

With police wielding automatic weapons shouting at them to "run," the paper reports, "Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) shuffled in the afternoon heat, leaning against a pole and pausing to catch his breath."

Article 1 of the US Constitution declares, "All legislative powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives." The founding document clearly presents the legislative body as the "first branch" of the American government, meant to most closely reflect the will of the people.

Yet, the portrait of this body Wednesday was one of impotence and cowardice, its members running in terror over the possibility that a small aircraft might be headed their way.

None of them, neither Democrat nor Republican, had either the inclination or the courage to demand to know why what is on paper the most powerful body in the land was being sent packing.

"I was on the floor of the House like everyone else," House Speaker Dennis Hastert told CNN News. "[Security officers] said we have to leave, just like everyone else. So we left," he added lamely.

Pelosi, who confirmed to CNN that she was "pulled right out of her shoes," declared "it's better to be safe than sorry."

It does not seem to occur to the Democratic congressional leader that there are some things more important than personal safety. At least for her and her

colleagues, the independence and political integrity of Congress are certainly not among them.

The ever-increasing erosion of congressional power and the consolidation of authority in the hands of the presidency has been going on for decades. Over the past four-and-a-half years, however, this process has accelerated immensely, as the Democrats have accepted the installation of an unelected president, backed a criminal war and collaborated in a sweeping assault on fundamental democratic rights.

The Democratic leadership is hardly in a position to stand on the constitutional separation of powers and the authority of the Congress. Nor are they inclined to do so. They are small people, concerned not with political principles, but rather their own careers and the big business interests that will make or break them.

Wednesday's events were instructive. A small group of armed men entered the Capitol, barked orders for Congress to disperse, and it meekly did so. Meanwhile, the Pentagon took control, and Vice President Cheney was whisked away to the undisclosed location—almost certainly the bunkers where a shadow government has been assembled, prepared to rule as a dictatorship during a national emergency.

What if next time the armed men are ordered to keep the entrances to Congress barred, if the White House decides to shut down the legislative branch altogether and rule with unrestrained power? Is there any reason to believe that the Chicken Littles in suits who went scurrying down the Capitol stairs Wednesday will resist?



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