New York's subway terror threat—was it a hoax?

Clare Hurley
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In a terror alert now widely dismissed as a hoax, New York City subway riders were subjected to increased searches of their belongings, and delayed and interrupted service on major subway lines at rush hour. Police officers, dogs and heavy weapons teams poured into subway and commuter rail stations in the days preceding and including the Columbus Day weekend.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced the alert just before rush hour on October 6. He claimed that government security sources had received intelligence from an informant in Iraq that as many as 19 operatives were in New York City planning to carry out an attack involving remotely detonated explosives hidden in briefcases and baby carriages, a new twist for a riders already accustomed to random searches of their backpacks and other large bags.

Department of Homeland Security officials, however, immediately downplayed the seriousness of the threat, calling it "specific, but not credible."

By the end of the day, subway service for the city's 4.6 million daily riders had been temporarily suspended in the heart of the midtown business district because of an unattended bag. Parts of Pennsylvania Rail station were shut down after the discovery of a soda bottle filled with a suspicious liquid that turned out to be cleaning fluid. The alert remained in effect for several days and then, on October 11, was abruptly dropped.

A barrage of conflicting information and claims as to the nature and motivation for the alert followed.

The mayor—as well as Fernando Ferrer, his Democratic opponent in the upcoming November 2 mayoral election—officials in the Department of Homeland Security, and President Bush himself rattled the sabers of the "war on terror" (or alternatively sought to muffle them), while most observers remained skeptical.

The timing of the alert was immediately suspect, coming just hours after Bush's speech before the National Endowment for Democracy raising the specter of the Al Qaeda terrorist network about to "establish a radical Islamic empire that spans from Spain to Indonesia."

The speech marked a renewed attempt to terrorize the American public and reassure his right-wing base in the face of dwindling commitment to the Iraq war. At a time when such rhetoric is wearing thin, a specific terrorist threat, credible or not, serves a definite political function.

Nor would it be the first time that such a tactic was used. "In fact, even Tom Ridge upon retiring from the DHS admitted that the post 9/11 terror alerts were often based on 'flimsy evidence' and that he had been pressured by the CIA and the Pentagon to raise the threat level." (*USA Today*, 10 May 2005)

Possibly Bloomberg was doing a favor for the president—whom he has supported both politically and with multimillion-dollar contributions to the Republican Party. He may also have acted on his own political motivations. The alert enabled him to remind New York voters that he was "tough on terror." At the same time, it served to divert attention from his opponents' criticism of his decision to boycott a mayoral debate in Harlem—scheduled for the evening of October 6 just hours after the supposed terror threat was announced.

Even as the DHS was discounting the reliability of their intelligence agent, said to have been correct in only 8 out of 15 warnings he had given, and none in cases in the US, Bloomberg claimed that it was better to play it safe rather than sorry. "If I'm going to make a mistake, you can rest assured it is going to be on the side of being cautious," he told the media.

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Many New Yorkers viewed the threat as a ploy to deflect attention from the mayoral debate. “Is it time to wag the dog yet?” asked Jimmy George, 65, a salesman from Teaneck New Jersey—a reference to the 1997 Barry Leninson movie *Wag the Dog* about a desperate White House that arranges a fake war. “It’s election time. It seems there’s always some type of threat,” he said.

If this was indeed the case, the ploy may well have paid off. After a lackluster campaign, which nevertheless has cost more than $52 million—with Bloomberg outspending Ferrer by 7 to 1—the incumbent mayor was able to double his lead in the wake of the terror alert to 28 points. He now stands at 60 percent over Ferrer’s 32 percent in a Quinnipiac University poll.

For his part, the Democrat Ferrer has approached the issue with extreme caution. He did not challenge Bloomberg on the credibility of the threat, or on his transparent manipulation of it. Like the majority of Democrats, including New York Senators Charles Schumer and Hillary Clinton, he makes a point of supporting the “war on terror” no less than the Republicans. He has only called for more information. “Now that we are no longer on high alert, it is appropriate for the mayor to tell us what he knew about the threat, when, and why he chose to act in the way he did,” Ferrer declared.

While the hyping of terror threats for both national and local political ends was no doubt at work in this episode, it cannot be ruled out that there was more behind the terror alert than mere fabrication.

One curious detail suggesting that this may be the case emerged on October 14, three days after the terror alert was dropped. The New York *Daily News* reported that insiders at the Department of Homeland Security had tipped off wealthy members of New York’s financial and arts world via emails sent out on October 3.

According to one such account in the *News*: “One of my oldest friends ... who is chief of intelligence for the U.S. Coast Guard and the CG’s liaison to the Office of Homeland Security ... called in a very specific caution not to enter or use the New York City subway system from October 7th through the 10th Friday through Monday ... based on information he has received of potential terrorist activity.”

A second email dated October 5 cautioned against using the subway for two weeks. Thus sections of New York City’s financial elite were warned of a potential terror attack *before* the mayor and the New York City Police Department had been alerted.

Under these circumstances, the public downplaying of the alert as “non-credible” and a hoax by the Department of Homeland Security may have ominous implications. Vice President Dick Cheney and other senior administration officials, it should be recalled, were similarly warned prior to 9/11 not to fly on commercial airplanes based on government foreknowledge of an imminent terrorist attack—a warning that was withheld from the public as the attacks were allowed to take place.

With the Bush administration increasingly beset with reversals—the quagmire in Iraq, the exposure of its gross incompetence in responding to Hurricane Katrina, the potential indictment of top advisors in the Valerie Plame affair, the indictment of House Majority leader Tom DeLay for campaign finance violations—the potential that another real terror attack may be allowed to go forward should be taken very seriously.

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