

Bush details “terror plot” to deflect NSA spying furor

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11 February 2006

In a blatant attempt to once again suppress political criticism by evoking the threat of terrorism, President Bush Thursday delivered a speech that included previously classified details about a supposed foiled plot to carry out a September 11-style attack on the tallest building on the US West Coast.

The inclusion of the incident in Bush’s speech to the US National Guard Association in Washington was an obvious response to the mounting criticism of the administration’s illegal and previously secret use of the National Security Agency (NSA) to conduct warrantless wiretapping of American citizens.

The White House is confronting dissension from within the Republican Party itself over the administration’s assertion that it has “inherent” constitutional powers not only to override the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), which requires going through the legal formality of obtaining a warrant from a secret intelligence court, but to abrogate all constitutional safeguards and democratic rights.

The Senate Judiciary Committee’s Republican chairman, Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, announced Wednesday that he intends to introduce legislation requiring the administration to seek a ruling from the FISA court on whether its secret wiretap program is legal. The announcement came two days after Attorney General Alberto Gonzales testified before the committee that the president needed no such authorization and could unilaterally order such spying based on his powers as commander-in-chief and on the congressional resolution authorizing the use of military force to retaliate against the perpetrators of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

Congresswoman Heather Wilson, a New Mexico Republican who heads a House subcommittee that oversees the NSA, also broke ranks with the

administration, declaring that she had “serious concerns” about the warrantless domestic spying and calling for a full congressional investigation into the wiretap program. Wilson, who faces a tight race with a Democratic challenger next November, said that the administration stonewalled her efforts to obtain information on the spying operation.

In an apparent attempt to quell this unrest within Republican ranks, Attorney General Gonzales and former NSA director Michael V. Hayden provided a four-hour, closed-door briefing to the full House Intelligence Committee, in which they reportedly shared some further details on the NSA wiretapping.

Bush prefaced his speech Thursday by declaring that the US remains “a nation at war” and promising “an update on the progress that we’re making in the broader war on terror.”

The only thing new in the speech, however, was a more detailed version of a supposed plot to which Bush had referred last October in another scare speech designed to counter the growing crisis of the administration over the war in Iraq and the failure of its response to Hurricane Katrina.

The alleged plot itself is hardly new, having supposedly been uncovered in February 2002, when the man identified as its key organizer was arrested in Singapore. According to the US administration’s account, it involved a scheme by Al Qaeda operatives to hijack an airliner and crash it into a Los Angeles skyscraper, then known as the Library Tower.

The only new tidbits included in Bush’s speech Thursday were that the terrorists had planned to use “shoe bombs to breach the cockpit door,” and that Al Qaeda leader Khalid Shaikh Mohammed had sought to recruit Southeast Asians to carry out the attack because of heightened suspicions directed against Arabs in the

wake of September 11.

There was no indication that the illegal surveillance ordered by the administration had anything to do with the discovery of the alleged plot, nor did Bush or other officials provide any evidence that a real threat ever existed.

Several security officials who spoke to the media on condition of anonymity expressed extreme skepticism about Bush's account. "It didn't go. It didn't happen," one such US official told the *Los Angeles Times*.

The newspaper reported Friday: "The official said he believed the Library Tower plot was one of many Al Qaeda operations that had not gone much past the conceptual stage. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity, saying that those familiar with the plot feared political retaliation for providing a different characterization of the plan than that of the president."

The citing of this alleged plot is clearly an example of the administration's familiar tactic of attempting to deflect political opposition by terrorizing the American people with the threat of another terrorist attack.

However, the attempt to exploit a four-year-old plot that apparently was never more than an idea raises an obvious question: If this is all the administration can point to, then how can it justify the methods of aggressive war abroad and police-state measures at home that it has implemented in the name of a war on terrorism?

The motives behind these policies lie not in some omnipresent threat of terrorist attack, but rather in the class interests of a financial elite determined to defend its wealth and privilege by means of naked force.

The administration has been able to pursue these policies because they enjoy the support of decisive sections of the ruling establishment, including both major political parties. The complicity of the Democratic Party in the assault on democratic rights found fresh expression Thursday with the announcement that the administration has reached an agreement with a bipartisan group of senators on renewing the USA Patriot Act.

The "compromise" reached between the Senate group and the White House maintains the sweeping repressive powers that were introduced under the legislation when it was passed in the wake of the September 11 attacks. This includes the right of federal authorities, without presenting any evidence of alleged wrongdoing, to

issue so-called national security letters secretly ordering public and private institutions to turn over health care, business, library, Internet service and other records on any American citizen.

The law includes a "gag order" on anyone receiving a demand for such records. The "compromise" version accepted by the senators introduces the less-than-cosmetic change of allowing an appeal of this gag provision after one year. Even then, the government can deny such an appeal merely by invoking national security, making any mention of its secret spying a crime punishable by imprisonment.

In an attempt to assuage public outrage over one of the most widely publicized abuses of power contained in the original act, the final version will also apparently restrict access of federal agents to at least some library records.

Illinois Democratic Senator Richard Durbin was among those declaring support for the deal with the administration. Acknowledging that the agreement "falls far short" of even the minimal reforms introduced in a bill passed last year by the Senate but then rejected by the House, he said, "If you measure it against the original Patriot Act ... we've made progress."

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada signaled that the Democrats would support the measure, calling it "a step in the right direction."

In fact, the agreement will make 14 key provisions of the legislation that were set to expire this year permanent US law, while extending two others—dealing with library records and national security letters—for four more years.

House Speaker Dennis Hastert indicated that the Republican-controlled House of Representatives would approve the version agreed to by the White House and the Senate leadership. This final legislation will represent a bipartisan agreement on a de facto revision of the US Constitution that will permanently abridge basic democratic rights.



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