

The Miami indictments: Manufacturing “terror” as a means of intimidation

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Within 48 hours of the US Justice Department’s startling announcement Friday of the round-up of a “home-grown” terrorist cell in Miami, the media had all but dropped the story.

Its initial response, particularly that of the broadcast news outlets, was to amplify the government’s lurid charges, warning of a conspiracy “even worse than September 11,” including a supposed plot to blow up the nation’s tallest building, the Sears Tower in Chicago. The television news channels carried live shots of the building, as if hijacked airplanes were about to plow into it.

As details of the supposed plot and the identity of the alleged conspirators came more sharply into focus, however, the media backed away. Not only was the Chicago skyscraper in no danger, there also existed no plot, much less the means of carrying one out. The entire government case was so manifestly bogus that not even the right-wing fabulists at Fox News could sustain it.

Nevertheless, the initial sensationalism and fear-mongering had an effect. By the time public defenders were appointed for the seven men indicted in the case, the attorneys’ protests that their clients were victims of blatant government entrapment received a minute fraction of the attention given the government’s “terror” charges at the outset.

Who are the seven young men—Narseal Batiste, 32, Patrick Abraham, 26, Burson Augustin, 21, Rothschild Augustine, 22, Naudimar Herrera, 22, Lyglenson Lemorin, 31, and Stanley Grant Phanor, 31—whose mug shots were broadcast into millions of American homes as the supposed new “face of terror?” They include a former Federal Express driver, two Haitian immigrants—one a legal resident and the other undocumented—and several other individuals from Miami’s deeply impoverished and predominantly black Liberty City neighborhood.

What will happen to them? Despite the transparent attempts by both the government and the media to “lower expectations” in relation to the case, and the near unanimous view of the legal community that the case is at best “thin” and at worst a crude exercise in state provocation and entrapment, the seven defendants remain in federal lockup. They face the very real threat of spending the rest of their lives in prison for the sole “crime” of having allowed themselves to be drawn into

supposedly incriminating conversations with an undercover FBI informant/agent provocateur.

There was neither criminal action nor a credible plan to commit a criminal act. No explosives and not a single weapon were found in the raids carried out by FBI SWAT teams in Miami. As one federal official put it, the “plot” was “more aspirational than operational.”

The real question is whose “aspirations” played the decisive role in this episode—those of the defendants, or those of the government? There is every indication that by means of a provocation in Miami—the latest in a long line of similar cases—the government was pursuing definite political objectives of the most reactionary sort, with chilling indifference towards the fate of those it ensnared in its fabrication of a “terrorist threat.” As far as the organizers of Bush’s “global war on terror” are concerned, the seven young men from Liberty City were utterly disposable people.

If there is anything unique about the Miami case, it is the fact that the victims of the provocation are non-Muslim African Americans in the poorest neighborhood in one of America’s poorest cities, rather than immigrants from Islamic countries. The modus operandi is not new. It has been employed by the federal authorities in case after case. In each of them, highly motivated agent provocateurs—some paid hundreds of thousands of dollars, others offered leniency on criminal charges—were dispatched to produce a “terrorist threat” where none existed.

To cite just a few of the more prominent cases:

* The conviction last month of 24-year-old Shahawar Matin Siraj, a Pakistani immigrant in New York City, for a supposed conspiracy to bomb the 34th Street subway station and other targets. The “plot” was the handiwork of a paid informant of the New York City police intelligence division, who earned \$100,000 for ensnaring Siraj and another man, both of whom pleaded guilty before trial. Again, there was neither a criminal act nor any means of committing one—no weapons, no explosives. The informant apparently was the one who first suggested the bombing plot, then offered to obtain

explosives and egged on the defendants by showing them pictures of Iraqis tortured by US guards at Abu Ghraib.

* In May of last year, two African-American Muslims, Dr. Rafiq Sabir, a Florida physician, and Tarik Shah, a well-known jazz musician, were arrested on charges of offering assistance, in the form of medical care and martial arts training, to Islamists waging “jihad.” Once again, the entire case is based on alleged conversations with a government informant, who, as in the Miami case, supposedly administered an oath of allegiance to Al Qaeda. Again, no bombs, no weapons, no acts, merely a paid informant entrapping two innocent men in allegedly incriminating conversations.

* In Lodi, California, the FBI obtained the convictions of an ice cream vendor and his son, both Pakistani immigrants, through the work of another informant, who was reportedly recruited from a \$7-an-hour job at a convenience store and paid nearly \$250,000 to infiltrate the local Muslim community and entrap the pair. The charge against them of lending material support to terrorism was based upon telephone conversations in which the informant urged the younger man to attend an Al Qaeda training camp in Pakistan, though there was no evidence that he ever did so.

* A local Muslim cleric and a pizzeria owner in Albany, New York are to go on trial in September in a case involving a convoluted—and fictitious—scheme to purchase a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, supposedly to assassinate a Pakistani official. The entire “plot” was concocted by an FBI informant for the purpose of ensnaring the pair. He sprung it on them after the pizzeria owner asked him for a \$5,000 loan to bail out his bankrupt business. The informant offered to let him keep \$5,000 if he agreed to hold onto \$50,000 that was supposedly to be used to buy the grenade launcher. Again, there was no act of violence, no means of carrying out such an act, no ties to terrorist groups and no plot, outside of the one invented by the FBI.

Each of these “terror cases” has received the same treatment from the media as the Miami arrests—screaming headlines and sensationalist broadcast claims echoing the government charges, followed by relative silence as it became clear that the accusations lacked any substance and that the defendants never posed the slightest threat to anyone.

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What begins to emerge is a picture of a “homeland security” police-bureaucratic dictatorship that acts with unspeakable cruelty, destroying people—for the most part poor, hapless immigrants—to further patently political aims.

The main target of these exercises is not the defendants—they are merely collateral damage. It is the American people as a whole. This is a government of ruthless men that stages provocation after provocation with the aim of spreading fear and intimidating popular opposition to policies of aggressive war abroad and social reaction and attacks on democratic rights at home.

For nearly five years, the Bush administration has implemented virtually all of its policies in the name of a “global war on terrorism.” It has relentlessly invoked the horrific loss of life in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 as justification for a long-planned war to conquer Iraq and its oil wealth, and the arrogation of unprecedented dictatorial powers by the White House. The ostensible political opposition in the Democratic Party has fully embraced the “war on terror,” while occasionally arguing that it is being mismanaged by the Bush administration.

The fact remains that every supposed terrorist threat foisted upon the public by the administration has proven to be a government-orchestrated provocation. The events of September 11 themselves have never been seriously investigated. How and why the government in Washington allowed them to take place—despite ample forewarnings of impending attacks involving the use of hijacked commercial jets as bombs, and even surveillance of the hijackers by US intelligence—has yet to be explained to the American people.

The need to sow fear and intimidate public opinion with supposed terrorist threats grows in direct proportion to the decline of popular support for the policies of both major parties, a political shift that can find no means of expression within the existing political setup. The way in which these provocations are organized and executed is evidence of an absolutely ruthless government that is bound neither by scruples nor serious scrutiny on the part of Congress, the courts or the media.

To the extent that schemes like the latest indictments in Miami are so quickly and thoroughly revealed—despite the best efforts of the mass media—to be shams, the threat grows that the desperate elements in control of the US government will organize something more convincing, in the form of an actual terrorist incident that, like September 11, will claim the lives of innocent Americans.



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