

Bush demands congressional rubber-stamp for police-state powers

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9 September 2006

In the fourth of a series of speeches aimed at fueling public fears of terrorism to boost his administration's failing political standing, President Bush appeared before an audience of right-wing policy experts in Atlanta, Georgia Thursday. The speech was focused on the demand that Congress move quickly to legalize the program of warrantless wiretapping of Americans, the existence of which was revealed late last year.

"Today I'm calling on the Congress to promptly pass legislation providing additional authority for the Terrorist Surveillance Program," Bush said, "along with broader reforms in the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act."

A federal district court judge in Detroit ruled last month that the warrantless wiretapping of international phone calls to and from the United States, conducted by the National Security Agency (NSA), was unconstitutional. The program was a violation of both the Fourth Amendment, which prohibits searches without a warrant, and the First Amendment, because of its chilling effect on free speech, according to Judge Anna Diggs Taylor.

A federal district court judge in New York is hearing a second challenge to the program, which focuses on the violation of the Federal Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), the law which Bush wants "reformed" because it flatly bars the president from authorizing spying on American citizens except on the basis of a court order granted by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, a panel set up in 1978 after revelations of illegal CIA and NSA spying on Americans during the Vietnam War period.

The Bush administration wants Congress to preempt these court challenges by retroactively legalizing the spying and, if possible, removing the subject entirely from judicial review by declaring the surveillance to be an exercise of the president's executive authority as commander in chief.

The main purpose of the whole series of speeches is to

divert public attention from the disastrous war in Iraq, opposed by a large majority of the American people, and whip up fear and confusion in the two months leading up to the November 7 midterm elections. Opinion polls showing that the Republican Party is likely to lose control of the House of Representatives, and perhaps the Senate as well, have aroused demands within leading circles of the administration for a counteroffensive using the White House's supposed trump card, fears of terrorism.

After saluting his hosts, a business-funded think tank called the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, Bush noted that Atlanta has itself experienced a terrorist attack. "This summer, you marked the tenth anniversary of the bombing in Centennial Olympic Park," he said. "That was the act of one madman."

This brief passage demonstrates the fundamentally dishonest character of the White House campaign. The 1996 Olympic Park bombing was not simply the act of a madman. The perpetrator, Eric Rudolph, while arguably deranged, worked in the service of a very definite right-wing ideology, steeped in anti-gay bigotry and religious fundamentalist opposition to abortion rights. In addition to the bombing during the Olympics, which killed a middle-aged woman, Rudolph also bombed an abortion clinic, a gay nightclub and a family planning office.

Politically speaking, Rudolph is close to the Christian fundamentalist wing of the Republican Party. Bush, of course, avoided any discussion of this linkage, which cuts across his claim to be leading the "ideological struggle of the 21st century" against Islamic totalitarianism.

The bulk of Bush's speech consisted of a potted history of Al Qaeda, in which Bush selected aspects of events leading up to the 9/11 attacks and presented them in a completely distorted fashion, so as to justify his own foreign and domestic policies. He presented the invasion of Afghanistan, the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, and the secret authorization of illegal

wiretapping as necessary responses to “gaps” revealed by the 9/11 experience.

The discussion of the prehistory of 9/11 is dangerous territory for Bush, whose administration ferociously opposed any independent investigation into the terrorist attacks. The White House accepted the formation of the 9/11 commission only after a two-year delaying action, under enormous public pressure, and only after being assured, with the selection of safe ruling-class figures, Democratic and Republican, that the commission would whitewash the evidence of US government complicity in the attacks.

Bush cited as the “first stage” of the preparation of 9/11 the supposed US indifference to the use of Afghanistan as a base for the terrorist organization of Osama bin Laden. He was silent on the real history of Afghanistan, where the bin Laden group originated in the CIA’s mobilization of Islamic fundamentalists to conduct terrorist attacks and guerrilla warfare against Soviet forces in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. Bin Laden himself, and many of his top aides, came to Afghanistan as part of this CIA-run program, and received training in terrorist tactics from the long-time masters of these methods in the US intelligence services.

There are widespread and justified suspicions that the CIA-Al Qaeda ties were not severed after the collapse of the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. These connections provide a far more plausible explanation of the events leading up to 9/11 than the official accounts, which portray the entire US intelligence apparatus as incompetent bunglers: whether or not the US government knew the full dimensions of the suicide hijacking plot, there is no question that some elements in the intelligence apparatus were aware of the 9/11 conspiracy and permitted the attacks to go forward, in order to provide the necessary pretext for a US military invasion of the Middle East and Central Asia.

Such suspicions are reinforced by the manner in which bin Laden resurfaces in public on a schedule that appears dreamed up by Karl Rove—on the eve of the 2004 presidential vote, to provide a last-minute boost for Bush’s reelection campaign, and then this week, with the release of a video celebrating 9/11, tailor-made for Republican Party campaign commercials.

Bush touched on a series of incidents in the US government’s conduct before 9/11—the failure of the CIA to notify other agencies about two Al Qaeda operatives who had entered the US and were living openly in San Diego; the refusal of FBI headquarters to respond to the

warning of a Phoenix agent about Islamic fundamentalists attending local flight schools; the FBI’s rejection of an appeal from the Minneapolis office to search the computer of Zaccarias Moussaoui, an Al Qaeda supporter detained on immigration charges in August 2001.

While the pattern suggests a high-level directive to stand down anti-terrorist efforts, Bush cited them in support of his demand for greater powers to conduct surveillance and wiretapping of American citizens.

He, of course, made no reference to perhaps the most notorious display of indifference to a warning about Al Qaeda: the briefing which he himself received from the CIA on August 6, 2001. After receiving a document entitled, “Bin Laden Determined to Strike Within the US,” which cited the threat of terrorist hijackings, the commander in chief returned to clearing brush on his ranch for another four weeks.

The Bush administration’s terrorism campaign will undoubtedly have an impact in the US capital and among the political and media elite. The *Washington Post* published an admiring front-page report Thursday declaring that Bush had surprised his political opponents and gained the upper hand with his aggressive speechmaking.

Speaking for Senate Democrats, Minority Leader Harry Reid said that the media was wrong to believe that the Democratic Party would strongly oppose Bush’s demand for new legislation reinstating the military tribunals which were struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court last June. “I think you’re looking for a fight that doesn’t exist,” he told a group of reporters.

However much he succeeds in cowing the Democrats, who share his commitment to a foreign policy based on aggressive militarism, Bush cannot reverse the tide of public opinion so easily. A few speeches will not outweigh the dreadful toll of death and destruction in Iraq—more Americans now killed than died on September 11, to say nothing of the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi dead—and the prospect of open civil war in the occupied country.



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