US Homeland Security official has “gut feeling” on terrorist attacks

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On July 10 Director of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff gave an interview to the editorial board of the *Chicago Tribune*, claiming that the US was at heightened risk of new terrorist attacks. The *Tribune* released an edited partial transcript of the interview and an accompanying article, which were soon picked up by television news broadcasts. However, Chertoff gave no evidence of serious risks, besides saying that he had a “gut feeling.”

Chertoff was plainly straining to give some reason for readers to believe his claims: “There are a lot of reasons to speculate [about increased al-Qaeda activity] but one reason that occurs to me is that they’re feeling more comfortable and raising expectations. In the last August, and in prior summers, we’ve had attacks against the West, which suggests that summer seems to be appealing to them. I think we do see increased activity in South Asia [...] All these things have given me kind of a gut feeling that we are in a period of increased vulnerability.”

Chertoff apparently raised as a major point that it is possible to fake North Carolina drivers’ licenses and use the fakes as false identification. This is, however, hardly news. Hundreds of thousands of fake drivers’ licenses from many American states—used largely by US youth for the purpose of evading laws barring underage drinking—long predate the “war on terror.”

Official reception of Chertoff’s warning supports suspicions that there was no substance to them. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) did not raise the terrorism alert level. William Arkin, a columnist for the *Washington Post*, opened his article on Chertoff’s comments by remarking acidly: “Michael Chertoff is hearing voices.”

Chertoff’s choice of venue—the right-wing editorial board of the *Chicago Tribune*—is also significant. The *Tribune*’s staff is of a far less uniformly right-wing bent than its editorial board. His decision to speak with the board, not with one of the *Tribune*’s reporters, indicates that he felt the need for a very friendly audience.

In short, the Bush administration has again used reactionary channels to release a fear-mongering tidbit into the US media, and Americans are to be terrorized again by a vague report of possible attacks based apparently on pure speculation, without any useful information on how to protect themselves.

This event takes place, moreover, as it becomes increasingly clear that the Bush administration does not take the Department of Homeland Security particularly seriously. On July 9, a House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee report noted that 24 percent of executive positions in the DHS (138 of 575) are vacant.

In evaluating Chertoff’s comments, it is useful to review the long history of close correlation between periods of heightened political crisis for the Bush administration and warnings of terrorist threats.

On May 18, 2002, the first public details about President Bush’s August 6, 2001 Presidential Daily Brief, “Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US,” appeared. The Bush administration’s contention that there had been no warning of the September 11 attacks was shown to be a lie. On May 20, FBI director Robert Mueller announced that more attacks were “inevitable.” The next day, US railroads and key New York City monuments were declared to be threatened.

On June 6, 2002, FBI agent Coleen Rowley revealed that she had written extensive memos before the September 11 attacks to her superiors about al-Qaeda member Zacharias Moussaoui, which they had ignored. On June 10, then-US Attorney General John Ashcroft

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announced that the US had arrested José Padilla and charged him with plotting to detonate a radioactive "dirty bomb" in US cities. These charges ultimately proved to be bogus, and it later was discovered that Padilla had been held for a month before Ashcroft announced it.

On February 5, 2003 Colin Powell lied to the UN, claiming that the US had clear and incontrovertible evidence of Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Huge anti-war protests ensued. On February 7, a US official warned of potential bio-terror attacks and implausibly advised Americans to stock up on duct tape and plastic sheeting to protect themselves.

On March 30, 2004 the Iraq Survey Group led by Charles Duelfer admitted in its report that Iraq had no WMD when the US invaded. On April 2 the DHS warned that terrorists might stuff fertilizer or fuel bombs into satchels or duffle bags.

On May 16, 2004 then-Secretary of State Colin Powell, in a television interview with MSNBC's Tim Russert, admitted that his 2003 testimony to the UN was "inaccurate and wrong and in some cases deliberately misleading." On May 21 the Abu Ghraib scandal of US torture of Iraqi detainees broke. On May 26 Ashcroft and Mueller claimed that al-Qaeda had "specific intention" for a US attack that was "90 percent" ready. Amazingly, if these claims were in any way true, the terror alert was not raised and Tom Ridge, then the top DHS official, was not invited to the press conference.

Terror alerts also immediately followed the revelation of CIA doubts about the Bush administration's false pre-war claims that Iraq attempted to purchase uranium from Niger, the 9/11 Commission's conclusion that the 9/11 attacks were preventable, the release of the US Congress' highly redacted reports on the September 11 attacks, the 2004 Democratic Party Convention, and the news that Karl Rove might be indicted by Special Prosecutor Patrick Fitzgerald in the CIA leak case. In the last case, the DHS released a statement saying the alert was based on information of "dubious credibility."

There is every sign that the latest terror alert is in keeping with this tradition. It comes on the heels of a major political crisis for the Bush administration: the opening of an anguished and disjointed debate in the US ruling elite about the US' increasingly catastrophic military position in Iraq, launched by the *New York Times*' July 8 editorial, "The Road Home."

Chertoff himself came close to linking his statement to the debate on a potential US pullout from Iraq in his interview with the *Tribune*. He said: "we're mindful that obviously there is Al Qaeda in Iraq, there are operatives who are becoming battle-hardened and getting more experience. [...] it would be Pollyannaish to believe that our departure from Iraq is going to settle all those people down."

It is entirely possible, moreover, that such announcements are testing the waters for a far more drastic intervention into US politics. The Republican Party risks electoral catastrophe in the 2008 elections: a veto-proof Democratic majority might emerge in the US Senate; Democratic presidential candidates are gaining the upper hand in the "money race" to get the hundreds of millions of dollars needed for a successful campaign. The domestic political consequences of a US defeat in Iraq are unpredictable, but they clearly are potentially immense. Chertoff's DHS wields tremendous power and the Bush administration is clearly in a state of political desperation.

Prior to the 2004 elections, there was an intensive campaign of so-called "Washington whispers," that is to say, suggestions that a terrorist attack in the US was likely and might significantly influence the elections. In July of 2004, the Bush administration requested a detailed analysis of what steps it should take to cancel the 2004 elections in the event of a terrorist attack.

It is entirely legitimate to ask whether Chertoff's comments are the beginning of a campaign to prepare the possible cancellation of the 2008 elections.

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