The motives behind the Bush administration's latest terror scare

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Over the last two weeks the Bush administration has orchestrated yet another campaign to sow fear and anxiety among the American people with unsubstantiated claims that signs are mounting of a looming Al Qaeda terrorist attack.

Not a day goes by without suggestions by Bush or top Homeland Security officials that an attack perhaps on the scale of 9/11, or worse, is being prepared. As always, the mass media dutifully report such claims as authoritative, without questioning the lack of evidence beyond the bald assertions of intelligence and other government officials.

The deliberate cultivation of a climate of fear is a basic modus operandi of the Bush White House. Can it be an accident that Bush is once again resorting to scare tactics at a time when his poll numbers are dropping to record lows, popular opposition to the war in Iraq is rising, and the administration is openly declaring that its war policy will not be bound by elections or debates in Congress? The sudden reemergence of Al Qaeda as a supposed threat to the safety and security of every American coincides with a political counteroffensive in which critics of Bush's military escalation are branded as either dupes or aiders and abettors of the terrorists.

The terror scare serves three basic political functions: to divert public attention from the disaster in Iraq and the social crisis within the US, to justify a foreign policy based on militarism and war, and to provide a pretext for police state measures at home.

What has happened over the last two weeks?

* On July 10, Homeland Security Director Michael Chertoff gave an interview to the editorial board of the *Chicago Tribune* in which he said the US was facing a heightened threat of attacks this summer. He gave no evidence of such a serious risk, other than saying he had a "gut feeling" an attack was being prepared. Why America's top anti-terrorist official—who has at his disposal vast resources, including information gathered by US spy agencies around the world—would have to rely on a his gut, rather than concrete evidence, Chertoff did not say.

* On July 17, the Bush administration released an unclassified summary of its National Intelligence Estimate, which claimed the US was facing a "heightened threat environment" for terrorist attacks because Al Qaeda had found a safe haven in Pakistan's tribal areas, from where it could plot such attacks. The Bush administration immediately seized upon the report, ominously entitled "The Terrorist Threat to the Homeland," as a pretext for possible military intervention in Pakistan and a justification for his war policy in Iraq as well as further domestic surveillance measures at home.

* On July 24, Bush gave a near-hysterical speech at a South Carolina air force base, where he insisted that the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq would result in terrorist attacks on the US. He repeated the absurd claim that US troops in Iraq were "fighting bin Laden's Al Qaeda" and said that following the advice of those advocating a draw-down of US troops in Iraq would be "disastrous for America."

* The same day, Air Force General Victor Renuart, who heads the US Northern Command, established by the Bush administration to oversee military operations within the US, told the Associated Press that the American military needs to triple its domestic military forces to counter the growing threat from Al Qaeda, which, he claimed, was actively preparing another terrorist attack in the US. "I believe there are cells in the United States, or at least people who aspire to create cells in the United States," Renuart said.

He called the National Intelligence Estimate a

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"summary of drumbeats, and the drumbeats are getting more prevalent out there. You cannot afford to ignore that." Asked if he was concerned about an attack in the US this summer, he replied, "I have to be concerned that it could happen any day."

* Over the past few days, television news broadcasts have prominently featured a recent alert issued by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), warning federal air marshals and other law enforcement agencies to look out for terrorists practicing to carry explosive components onto aircraft. The July 20 warning was based on the seizure of "curious" items found in the luggage of a handful of passengers over the last year, including "wires, pipes or tubes, cell phone components and dense clay-like substances," such as blocks of cheese. Security officers were instructed to keep any eye out for "ordinary items that look like improvised explosive device components," because they might be used to test airport security.

The agency admitted, however, that none of the passengers with any of these items were found to have any connections to criminal or terrorist organizations. TSA spokeswoman Ellen Howe subsequently downplayed the story, saying Tuesday, "There is no credible, specific threat here. Don't panic. We do these things all the time."

Her remarks follow a well-established pattern. The government issues dire warnings which are given sensationalist coverage by the media. In most cases, there follow acknowledgments that the government has no concrete evidence of a specific terrorist plot. Why, then, the gratuitous alarms? The media never bothers to ask a government official to explain.

This has been the stock-in-trade of the Bush administration since the 9/11 terrorist attacks—an event which itself has never been seriously investigated and for which no accounting has been given of supposed intelligence lapses that point to the possible complicity of the government itself.

At numerous points in Bush's tenure, terror warnings have been issued in the midst of damaging revelations and political events that shook the administration. For example, two days after the May 18, 2002 revelation that Bush had received a presidential briefing five weeks before 9/11, warning of a terrorist attack within the US, FBI director Robert Mueller announced more attacks were "inevitable." The next day, officials declared that US railroads and key New York City monuments were threatened.

In the days following Secretary of State Colin Powell's February 2003 speech at the UN, where he claimed the US had incontrovertible evidence that Iraq had WMDs, and mass international anti-war demonstrations on February 15, a US official warned of potential bio-terror attacks and advised Americans to stock up on duct tape and plastic sheeting to protect themselves.

Similar unsubstantiated warnings followed the Abu Ghraib revelations of US torture of Iraqi detainees, the revelation of CIA doubts about false pre-war claims that Iraq attempted to purchase uranium from Niger, the 9/11 Commission's conclusion that the attacks were preventable, and news that Karl Rove might be indicted in the CIA leak case.

The Bush administration has set out to make fear and anxiety over terrorism the center of public life. It hopes to appeal to the confusion of more backward sections of the population in order to bludgeon popular opposition to its agenda of militarism and political repression at home.

In so doing, Bush has enjoyed the support of the Democratic Party, which, far from exposing this cynical attempt to manipulate public opinion, has fully embraced the so-called "war on terror." The Democrats have frequently attacked Bush for not going far enough in "securing the homeland."

There is no doubt that the brutal neo-colonialist foreign policy of the US government has placed the American people in danger of another terrorist attack. However, the greatest threat to the democratic rights and safety of the American people, and the people of the world, comes not from Islamic extremists in the Middle East, but from US imperialism and the warmongers in Washington.

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