

US: Republicans prepare to play terror card in 2008 election

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The Republican Party and its presidential candidate Senator John McCain are preparing to wage their 2008 campaign on the same essential issue that the Republicans have used to contest the last three national elections: terror.

This is scarcely surprising, as the so-called “global war on terrorism” and the events of September 11, 2001 have provided the essential ideological framework for virtually all of the Bush administration’s policies for nearly seven years. It is a framework that the ostensible political opposition, the Democratic Party, has accepted, voting to fund wars of aggression abroad and approve domestic spying and the curtailment of democratic rights at home.

With widespread predictions that the Republicans face a devastating defeat at the polls in November, the attempt to breathe new life into this campaign to terrorize the American public with the supposedly ubiquitous threat of terrorism is assuming an increasingly desperate character.

Vice President Dick Cheney sounded the terror theme last Thursday in a speech to 700 Republican donors attending a \$1,000-a-plate dinner in midtown Manhattan.

“This election year poses one fundamental question on national security: Who is serious about fighting and winning the war on terror, on every front?” declared Cheney. “And the choice is going to be very clear. On one side is the Democratic Party—led by the likes of Senator Harry Reid, who said more than a year ago that the war is lost. A Democratic Party whose leaders in Congress permitted a vital surveillance law to expire, leaving the United States more vulnerable to terrorist attack.”

“On the other side of this divide,” said the vice president, “is the Republican Party—whose leaders have supported the war on terror, regardless of what the polls say or the pundits declare.”

Cheney continued: “Since 9/11, our administration had to make a lot of tough decisions on national security. As a result, the enemies of our country have been kept off balance. I don’t think the terrorists put up their feet after 9/11 and said, ‘Well, let’s not hit the United States again in ’01, ’02, ’03, ’04, ’05, ’06, or ’07.’ They wanted to hit us. They planned on it. They tried to do it. But they failed.”

Cheney names seven years, but not a single episode in which they “tried to hit us.” Virtually every supposed terrorist plot prosecuted by the government over the past six-and-a-half years has shared one common feature: the alleged conspiracy would never have existed without the active intervention of confidential informants.

Appearing Monday before AIPAC, the largest US pro-Israel lobby, Senator McCain managed to mention terror, terrorism or terrorists 15 times in his brief speech. He recycled the old pretexts for war against Iraq—the supposed danger posed by a regime with “weapons of mass destruction” and terrorist ties—to justify a policy of aggression against Iran.

At the same time, he invoked the threat of terror as an argument for continuing the five-year-old war and occupation of Iraq. A US withdrawal, he claimed, would create a “terrorist sanctuary” that “would profoundly affect the security of the United States.”

The drumbeat over terrorism has a very definite purpose. The 2008 elections are being held under conditions of bitter divisions within the US ruling elite itself over the future of American policy. Sharp opposition has emerged within ruling circles to a continuation of the course set by the Bush administration, particularly in the Middle East. This finds its political expression in the groundswell of support for Democrat Barack Obama both in the foreign policy establishment and on Wall Street.

The constant invocation of the threat of terrorism and the charge that the Democrats are “soft on terrorists” is aimed at intimidating the Democrats, changing the debate within influential media and policy circles and stampeding public opinion.

While this strategy has proven effective in relation to the Democrats, driving them further to the right and pushing the Iraq war to the back of their political agenda, in relation to the American people as a whole the Republicans confront a problem.

With its constant repetition, the terror refrain has lost more and more of its political impact. Now, even the former White House press secretary Scott McClellan has acknowledged that the fear-mongering utilized in the run-up to the Iraq war was phony “political propaganda.”

To have any hope of effectively playing the “terror card” as a means of intimidating the population in the run-up to the 2008 election, the Republican Party needs more than rhetoric.

One indication that they are working to line up deeds that would correspond with the scare words has come from the US prison camp in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Defense lawyers for five detainees charged with conspiracy in the planning of the September 11, 2001 attacks filed a 20-page legal brief charging that the Pentagon is rushing their clients before a military commission in order to have the proceedings coincide with the height of the upcoming presidential contest.

The brief points to an email from a civilian member of the

prosecution proposing that the trial begin on September 15, the first Monday following the seventh anniversary of the attacks on New York and Washington. “Not coincidentally,” the brief states, “that would force the trial of the case in mid-September, some seven weeks before the general election.”

McClatchy Newspapers notes matter-of-factly that for some time military defense lawyers have cited “internal debates by appointees about whether charges could be brought for political gain or to capture the imagination of the American people.”

This “debate,” obviously, is going on behind the backs of the American people. Its implications deserve careful consideration. Elements within the US government are discussing the potential political advantages for their party of accelerating the trial of five men on charges that could lead to their execution.

Even more disturbing are the remarks of the former Republican speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, during an appearance in New York in late April. Gingrich has issued public warnings that his party faces a “real disaster” and “decisive losses” in Congress unless it charts a “bold course” in November.

Asked by a member of the audience in New York why there had not been another attack like that of September 11, 2001, the former House speaker replied that he did not know, but indicated that it was one of the political problems he saw confronting his party.

“This is... one of the great tragedies of the Bush administration,” Gingrich declared. “The more successful they’ve been at intercepting and stopping bad guys, the less proof there is that we’re in danger. And, therefore, the better they’ve done at making sure there isn’t an attack, the easier it is to say, ‘Well, there never was going to be an attack anyway.’ *And it’s almost like they should every once in a while have allowed an attack to get through just to remind us.*” (Emphasis added).

Gingrich’s seemingly off-hand remark provides an unintended glimpse into the thinking and discussions within top echelons of the Bush administration and the Republican Party. Its logic is unmistakable. Another major terrorist attack on US soil would serve to “remind” the American people of the supposedly overriding threat of terrorism and thereby politically shock them into voting for the party advancing the most hard-line anti-terrorist rhetoric.

The Republican ex-speaker’s brief comment raises an obvious though chilling question: Are elements within the current administration considering an “October surprise”—or, more precisely, an October bomb—as a means of shifting the dismal prospects confronting McCain and his fellow Republicans at the polls? Are they weighing the option of either engineering or facilitating a terrorist attack and significant loss of American lives in order to swing the election?

Desperate men do desperate things. However much the American ruling elite may trust Democrat Barack Obama to defend its interests at home and abroad, for Bush, Cheney and Co., the prospect of a Democratic sweep must be profoundly unsettling.

This is an administration that has carried out war crimes—aggressive war, torture, assassinations and illegal detentions. A wholesale replacement of leading government figures raises the threat that still more revelations of the Bush administration’s criminality will emerge, leading, whatever

Obama’s intention, to prosecutions. Among the most threatening potential revelations are those concerning 9/11 itself.

Gingrich’s remark that they should “have allowed an attack to get through” raises the question: Is that what they did on September 11, 2001? Did they let that one “get through” and thereby create the justification for two wars causing millions of deaths and all of the reactionary policies that followed?

With the seventh anniversary of the 9/11 attacks approaching, the tragic events of that day remain shrouded in mystery. Not a single US official has been held accountable for what, ostensibly, was the greatest single failure of the military intelligence apparatus in US history. The official investigations carried out by Congress and the 9/11 Commission have produced politically-motivated cover-ups.

What evidence has emerged about those implicated in the attacks, however, strongly suggests that they enjoyed protection from within the highest levels of the US state, which believed that a terrorist attack on American soil would provide an indispensable pretext for launching military actions in pursuit of longstanding strategic objectives of US imperialism.

That a replay today of 9/11 in some form or other would further the administration’s aims is far from certain. There is the unhappy precedent—for Bush, Cheney and Co.—of Spain. The attempt by their right-wing ally, Prime Minister José María Aznar, to manipulate a 2004 terrorist attack in Madrid to swing an election backfired badly, triggering mass public outrage and defeat at the polls.

Letting an attack “get through” could serve another purpose. It should be recalled that in 2004 it was revealed that the Homeland Security Department had drawn up detailed plans for suspending the national elections in the event of a major terrorist incident.

The behind-the-scenes political manipulation of the Guantánamo military trials and Gingrich’s comments on the salutary effects of a terrorist attack are indicative of the profound crisis of bourgeois democracy in America, where elections are once again unfolding in an atmosphere of provocation and criminality—in which both major parties are implicated. These developments underscore the reality that the US government is dominated by elements who are truly prepared to do anything to maintain their hold on power.

There is not the slightest room in the present situation for political complacency or unfounded illusions in the Democratic Party and its presumptive standard bearer Barack Obama. The defense of basic democratic rights requires a fight to organize the working class as an independent political force and the creation of a genuine socialist alternative to the two parties of America’s financial and corporate oligarchy, the Democrats and Republicans.



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