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Bush's new Department of Homeland Defense: the scaffolding of a police state

By the Editorial Board
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The sudden announcement by President George W. Bush that he will seek the creation of a huge new federal Department of Homeland Defense, to control most federal domestic policing and security programs, must be understood on two levels. In its timing, it is a transparent attempt to distract public attention from the revelations of advance warnings to the government about the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. In its substance, the proposal represents an acceleration of the moves towards presidential dictatorship that have characterized every step taken by the Bush administration since September 11.

The consolidation of agencies such as the Coast Guard, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Transportation Security Agency and others—22 in all, from five separate government departments—represents an unprecedented concentration of police powers at the federal level. The new cabinet level department would become overnight the third largest in the federal government, in terms of manpower, with 170,000 workers, behind only the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

As outlined by Bush, it would carry out four main functions: border and transportation security, emergency and disaster preparedness, the development of countermeasures for nuclear, biological and chemical warfare, and the centralized storage and analysis of information on potential threats, to be supplied by the FBI, CIA, NSA and other government spy services.

The Bush administration presented the plan as a measure to protect the American people. But it would be more correct to say that the new department will concentrate the police forces of the government for the purpose of surveillance and repression against the American people.

As the *Washington Post* noted, the agencies to be combined in the new department “go well beyond policing the borders.” The newspaper continued: “They reach deep into American life, doing everything from coordinating disaster relief to tracking down foreigners working illegally in restaurants. Some

experts said this could prove controversial, because it blurs the boundaries between gathering intelligence on foreigners and doing the same with American citizens.”

Perhaps the most ominous measure is the inclusion in the Department of Homeland Defense of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), now headed by Bush's former campaign manager, Joseph Albaugh. FEMA was designated as the lead agency in plans developed 20 years ago under the Reagan administration to impose martial law in the event of a new and unpopular Vietnam-style war in Central America. FEMA's brief included the establishment of prison camps at mothballed military bases for the detention of hundreds of thousands of US citizens and foreign immigrants.

Similar moves are now being considered against the Arab-American and Asian-American population, and all other potential opponents of a new US war against Iraq or elsewhere in the Middle East—or in Colombia, the Philippines, Georgia, or some other target of US aggression. This has already been foreshadowed in the roundup of thousands of immigrants after September 11 and their ongoing mistreatment in jails and detention facilities.

Only three months ago the American media was filled with reports about the Bush administration's decision to establish a “shadow government” in the wake of September 11, with the dispatch of designated executive branch officials to secret bunkers, without the knowledge or approval of Congress. But today there is not one comment from the media or the Congress connecting those preparations of a behind-the-scenes dictatorship to this week's unveiling of the scaffolding for a police state.

Not a single voice in Congress opposes what amounts to a gross violation of fundamental US constitutional principles: separation of powers, checks and balances, congressional oversight of the executive branch, and the right to privacy and freedom from government prying. Congressional oversight of the new behemoth agency will be far more limited than the current supervision of 22 separate smaller agencies. Bush cited the lessened congressional scrutiny as one of the main advantages of his reorganization plan.

The White House plan was greeted enthusiastically by former Democratic vice presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman, Congresswoman Jane Harman, and other influential congressional Democrats, as well as by Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle and House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt. All pledged speedy action on the plan, and endorsed Bush's appeal for passage before the end of 2002—a flagrant attempt to steamroll the changes through Congress without any serious public discussion or debate.

The centralization of all federal domestic security forces into a single agency parallels another major action by the Pentagon, which in April won White House approval to set up a new four-star command, dubbed the Northern Command, covering the North American continent. For the first time in US history, all troops, planes and ships on the territory of the United States and Canada will be under the command of a single officer—an action always rejected in the past, even during World War II, for fear of its dangerous implications for civilian control of the military and democratic governance.

These measures are combined with constant alerts, warnings and sensationalized publicity of alleged terrorist threats, aimed at keeping the American population off balance and creating the conditions where some new catastrophe—perhaps on an even more terrible scale than September 11—can become the occasion for an outright suspension of democratic rights and the imposition of martial law.

The secretive manner in which the plan was drawn up, and the sudden and improvised manner in which it was released, have their own significance. The process bespeaks an administration in enormous crisis, concerned that its political support is eroding, that the US and global financial situation is balanced on a knife edge, and that emergency powers may be required to deal with domestic social unrest.

Less than two months ago, top White House officials dismissed Democratic Party proposals for a new cabinet department for homeland security, calling it, at best, a possibility for the distant future. Budget Director Mitch Daniels told the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee April 11, “The president has said from the outset that the structure for organizing and overseeing homeland security may evolve over time as we all learn more and as circumstances change.” The only circumstance that has changed significantly since then is the credibility of the administration, shaken by the wave of revelations of advance warnings of September 11 that were ignored or suppressed.

The *Washington Post*, in what purports to be an inside account of the decision, described what it called “a seven-week deliberative process secretive even by the standards of [the] Bush administration.” To call this process “deliberative” is surely misleading. Who was deliberating? Only four top Bush aides reportedly discussed and drafted the proposal: Bush’s present homeland security adviser Thomas Ridge, Budget Director Daniels, White House chief of staff Andrew Card and White House counsel Alberto Gonzalez. The plan then went to Bush and Cheney for ratification.

The reorganization plan was unveiled with virtually no advance notification to Congress, or even to the cabinet officers whose departments and responsibilities would be radically altered. The House and Senate Republican leaders were reportedly informed on Wednesday evening, 24 hours before Bush gave his nationally televised speech. Democratic congressional leaders learned of the plan the same day it was presented to the country.

Bush’s nationally televised speech Thursday evening was true to form: a string of platitudes, non sequiturs and lies delivered in a barely literate fashion. He spoke for only 11 minutes, with less than half of this time devoted to the subject of what he called “the most extensive reorganization of the federal government since the 1940s.”

Bush declared his support for “the important work of the Intelligence Committees of Congress,” which are now engaged in a closed-door investigation into the performance of US intelligence agencies before September 11. The administration, however, stalled the investigation for nearly nine months, finally agreeing to cooperate only after it became convinced that the joint House-Senate panel was committed to a whitewash.

There must be no “finger pointing,” Bush insisted. In other words, no leading figures in the government or state apparatus are to be held accountable for actions that contributed to the deaths of more than 3,000 people—the worst single loss of civilian life in US history. But how can there be a serious investigation if its premise is a free pass for high officials? The outcome of such a procedure—general amnesty—has been determined before any facts have been examined. This fits the textbook definition of cover-up, and it makes a mockery of the pretense that the establishment of a new super-police agency is motivated by the need to protect the American people.

Bush stated: “I do not believe anyone could have prevented the horror of September the 11th. Yet we now know that thousands of trained killers are plotting to attack us, and this terrible knowledge requires us to act differently.”

The first assertion is an absurdity, the second is pure sophistry. Bush says that nothing could have prevented September 11: actually, routine enforcement of air travel security precautions would have sufficed, since the 19 alleged hijackers boarded planes armed with box-cutters, in many cases after buying one-way first-class tickets—something that in and of itself is supposed to arouse the suspicions of airport security. At least some of the alleged hijackers paid cash—another occurrence that is supposed to prompt special attention from security personnel.

This is to say nothing of the mounting revelations about FBI and CIA knowledge of the identities and Al Qaeda affiliations of many of the hijackers in the eighteen months leading up to September 11.

As for the claim that we “now” know “thousands of trained killers are plotting to attack us,” this would suggest that the government was unaware of such terrorist threats prior to September 11. This canard is in line with the basic pretense that everything the Bush administration has done since that day—both abroad and at home—was entirely unpremeditated.

But on September 10, as the White House recently admitted, a National Security Decision Directive calling for all-out war on Al Qaeda, including an invasion of Afghanistan, was sitting on Bush’s desk awaiting his signature.

All the evidence suggests that, far from September 11 being unpreventable, it was foreseen by the US intelligence apparatus and permitted to happen. The most innocent explanation—although not the most plausible—is government negligence on a colossal scale, rising to the level of criminal negligence. The more plausible explanation is deliberate complicity. A significant faction within the American state viewed a major terrorist atrocity as a reasonable price to pay to obtain the necessary pretext for a war in the oil-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East.

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