

Not Scared Yet? Try Connecting These Dots

by Ray McGovern

Ray McGovern (rmcgovern~school.org) worked as a CIA analyst from the administration of John F. Kennedy to that of George H. W. Bush. The following guest commentary was first published on Aug. 9, by CommonDreams.org.

“Pre-election period . . . pre-election plot . . . pre-election threats”

These rolled off National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice’s lips no less than seven times yesterday on CNN’s “Late Edition” as she discussed the likely timing of a terrorist attack. She stayed on message.

Dr. Rice said the government had actually “picked up discussion” relating to “trying to do something in the pre-election period,” and added that information on the threat came from “active multiple sources.”

I found myself wondering if those sources are any better than those cited by Attorney General John Ashcroft on May 26, when he launched this campaign, citing “credible intelligence from multiple sources that al-Qaeda plans an attack on the United States” before the November election. Ashcroft’s warning came out of the blue, without the customary involvement of the directors of the CIA and Department of Homeland Security (although the latter quickly fell in line).

In support of his warning, Ashcroft cited “an al-Qaeda spokesman,” who the FBI later was embarrassed to admit is “The Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigades.” Sinister sounding though the name may be, this “group” is thought to consist of no more than one person with a fax machine, according to a senior U.S. intelligence official. That fax is notorious for claiming credit for all manner of death and destruction.

Are the recent warnings and heightened alerts legitimate or contrived? Is this yet another case of “intelligence” being conjured up to serve the political purposes of President Bush and his top advisers? The record of the past three years gives rise to the suspicion that this is precisely what is afoot.

Running Scared

While Iraq generally has moved off the front page, those paying attention to developments there have watched a

transition from mayhem to bedlam in recent days. Worse still, the U.S. economy is again faltering as the election draws near.

Perhaps most worrisome of all from the administration’s point of view are the fresh photos, film footage, and other reporting of torture in U.S.-run prisons in Iraq and elsewhere that will surface in the coming weeks. This round is said to include details of the rape and other abuse of some of the Iraqi women and the hundred or so children—some as young as 10 years old—held in jails like Abu Ghraib. U.S. Army Sergeant Samuel Provance, who was stationed there, has blown the whistle on the abuse of children as well as other prisoners. He recounted, for example, how interrogators soaked a 16-year-old, covered him in mud, and then used his suffering to break the youth’s father, also a prisoner, during interrogation.

I suspect it is the further revelations of torture that worries the White House most. Adding to its woes, last week over a hundred lawyers, including seven past presidents of the American Bar Association and former FBI Director William Sessions, issued a statement strongly condemning the legal opinions of government attorneys holding that torture might be legally defensible. The lawyers called for an investigation regarding whether there is a connection between those legal opinions and the abuses at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere.

While Bush Administration officials have tried to distance themselves from the opinions and claim that the President did not authorize the torture of suspected al-Qaeda or Taliban fighters, the photographic evidence speaks for itself. And neo-conservative William Kristol’s bragging Sunday on ABC’s “This Week” that this Administration’s interrogation techniques have been successful because they are “rougher than what John Kerry would approve of” does not help the Administration’s case.

With each new revelation of torture, the “few-bad-apples” explanation strains credulity closer to the breaking point. Nor can it be denied that the abuse took place on this Administration’s watch. Thus, there are likely to be increasing demands that the commander-in-chief—or at least his defense secretary—take responsibility. Where is it that the buck is supposed to stop?

Connecting Dots

What has all this to do with Condoleezza Rice’s multiple mention of “pre-election threats”? Can these two dots be connected? I fear they can.

When John Ashcroft fired the opening shot in this campaign to raise the specter of a “pre-election” terrorist event, it seemed to me that the Administration might be beginning to prepare the American people to accept postponement or cancellation of the November election as a reasonable option.

Tom Ridge's warning in early July that Osama bin Laden is "planning to disrupt the November elections" added to my concern, as did:

- Word that Ridge has asked the Department of Justice to analyze what legal steps would be needed to permit postponement of the election;
- The request by the Director of the Election Assistance Commission for Ridge to provide "guidelines" for cancelling or rescheduling the election in the event of a terror attack;
- The matter-of-fact tone of a recent vote on CNN's website: "Should the United States postpone the election in the event of a terrorist attack?" That vote seems to have been greeted more by yawns than by any expression of outrage.

That the House of Representatives on July 22 passed a resolution by a 419-2 vote denying any agency or individual the authority to postpone a national election suggests that many in Congress are taking the various trial balloons and other hints seriously.

The Emperor's New Suit of Clothes

It seems a safe bet that President Bush is not sleeping as soundly as he did before the abuse of prisoners came to light. He may feel thoroughly exposed in the magic suit sold him by Ashcroft's tailor/lawyers together with those working for White House counsel Alberto Gonzales, and may wish he had paid more attention to the strong cautions of Secretary of State Colin Powell against playing fast and loose with the Geneva Conventions on Prisoners of War.

The President can take little consolation in Gonzales' reassurance that there is a "reasonable basis in law" that could provide a "solid defense," should an independent counsel at some point in the future attempt to prosecute him under the U.S. War Crimes Act of 1996 for exempting the Taliban and perhaps others from the protections of the Geneva Conventions, to which the War Crimes Act is inextricably tied.

Meaning? Meaning that if the President's numbers look no better in October than they do now, there will be particularly strong personal incentive on the part of the President, Rumsfeld, and Vice President Cheney to pull out all the stops in order to make four more years a sure thing. What seems increasingly clear is that putting off the election is under active consideration—a course more likely to be chosen to the extent it achieves status as just another option.

How Would Americans React?

On Friday I listened to a reporter asking a tourist in Washington, D.C., whether he felt inconvenienced by all the blockages and barriers occasioned by the heightened alert. While the tourist acknowledged that the various barriers and inspections made it difficult to get from one place to another, he made his overall reaction quite clear: "Safety first! I don't want to see another 9/11. Whatever it takes!" I was struck a

few hours later as I tuned into President Bush speaking at a campaign rally in Michigan: "I will never relent in defending America. Whatever it takes."

How prevalent this sentiment has become was brought home to me as Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) quizzed 9/11 Commissioner Bob Kerrey (a former Democratic Senator from Nebraska) at a hearing last week on the Commission's sweeping recommendation to centralize foreign and domestic intelligence under a new National Intelligence Director in the White House. Kerrey grew quite angry as Kucinich kept insisting on an answer to his question: "How do you protect civil liberties amid such a concentration of information and power?"

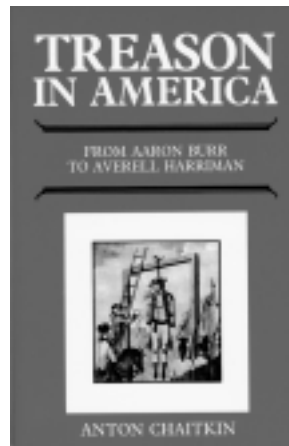
Kerrey protested that the terrorists give no priority to civil liberties. He went on to say that individual liberties must, in effect, be put on the back burner, while priority is given to combatting terrorism. Whatever it takes.

Does this not speak volumes? Would Kerrey suggest that Americans act like the "good Germans" of the 1930s, and acquiesce in draconian steps like postponement or cancellation of the November election?

These are no small matters. It is high time to think them through.

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