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How Bogus Fears Bought Bush Four More Years

by James Bovard

Is a president entitled to frighten voters into submission to perpetuate his power over them? While many people are catching on to Bush's deceptions on Iraq, most Americans have forgotten the scams of his reelection campaign.

George W. Bush was reelected in large part because he boosted the number of Americans frightened of terrorism during 2004. In October 2001, 73 percent of Americans feared another imminent terrorist attack. By early 2004, only 55 percent had such fears. But by August 2004, the figure had rebounded to 64 percent. This 9 percent proved vital for Bush. People who saw terrorism as the biggest issue in the 2004 election voted for him by an almost 7-to-1 margin.

Bush's reelection campaign intensified Americans' memories of terrorist carnage. One of the first Bush reelection campaign television ads, in early 2004, entitled "Safer, Stronger," showed firemen carrying a flag-draped corpse from the rubble at Ground Zero. A second ad, showing an American flag in front of the wreckage of the World Trade Center, featured the motto "Tested" and began with a statement from the president — "I'm George Bush and I approve this message." An announcer then informed viewers,

The last few years have tested America in many ways. Some challenges we've seen before. And some were like no others. But America rose to the challenge.... Freedom, faith, families, and sacrifice.

President Bush. Steady leadership in times of change.

The TV ads were followed by five-alarm terror alerts that spurred even more helpful publicity. On May 26, Attorney General John Ashcroft announced,

Credible intelligence from multiple sources indicates that al-Qaeda plans to attempt an attack on the United States in the next few months. This disturbing intelligence indicates al-Qaeda's specific intention to hit the United States hard.... After the March 11th attack in Madrid, Spain, an al-Qaeda

spokesman announced that 90 percent of the arrangements for an attack in the United States were complete.

Ashcroft assured one and all that the attack plans had been “corroborated on a variety of levels.” He also distributed photos of seven Arab terror suspects and urged Americans to “be on the lookout ... for each of these seven individuals. They all pose a clear and present danger to America. They all should be considered armed and dangerous.”

The 2002 law that created the Department of Homeland Security made it the lead agency in assessing and publicizing terror threats. However, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge first learned the details of the “Gang of Seven’s” devastating attack plan while watching Ashcroft’s televised news conference. A few hours before Ashcroft’s fireworks, Ridge appeared on CNN and announced, “Americans’ job is to enjoy living in this great country and go out and have some fun.” Homeland Security officials told the media that “there was no new information about attacks in the U.S., and ... no change in the government’s color-coded ‘threat level.’”

The Ashcroft warning quickly became a laughingstock — at least to people who followed the news. *NBC News* reported on May 28 that Ashcroft’s primary al-Qaeda source was “a largely discredited group, Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigades, known for putting propaganda on the Internet” that had falsely “claimed responsibility for the power blackout in the northeast last year, a power outage in London, and the Madrid bombings.” One former White House terrorism expert commented, “The only thing they haven’t claimed credit for recently is the cicada invasion of Washington.” The group’s warning consisted of one e-mail sent two months earlier to a London newspaper. *Newsweek* reported that the White House

played a role in the decision to go public with the warning.... Instead of the images of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, the White House would prefer that voters see the faces of terrorists who aim to kill them.

A stream of terrorist warnings

Just before the Fourth of July weekend, the FBI notified 18,000 law-enforcement agencies of a new terrorism threat: “booby-trapped beer coolers” as well as “plastic-foam containers, inner tubes and other waterborne flotsam.” It was unclear whether this warning rallied the redneck vote for Bush.

The Bush administration followed Independence Day with hints that terrorists could cancel the November 2 election. On July 8, Ridge called a press conference and announced, “Credible reporting now indicates that al-Qaeda is moving forward with its plans to carry out a large-scale attack in the United States in an effort to disrupt our democratic process.” He warned, “These are not conjectures or mythical statements we are making. These are pieces of information

that we could trace comfortably to sources that we deem to be credible.” He added, “I think we have to err on the side of transparency to protect the voting rights of the country.” The Homeland Security Department formally requested that the Justice Department “analyze what legal steps would be needed to permit the postponement of the election were an attack to take place.”

Democrats derided Ridge for firing blanks. Rep. Jane Harman (D-Calif.), the senior Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, condemned his warning: “Six days ago, the leadership of the House and Senate Intelligence Committees and leadership of the House and Senate were briefed on these so-called new threats. They are more chatter about old threats, which were the subject of a press conference by Attorney General Ashcroft and Director [Robert] Mueller six weeks ago.”

On Sunday, August 1, immediately after the Democratic National Convention, the Bush administration announced “Code Orange” terror alerts for banks and financial institutions in New York, Newark, and Washington, D.C. Ridge, in a press conference that his aides heavily hyped to television news producers, announced that there is “new and unusually specific information about where al-Qaeda would like to attack.” He warned that the attacks could involve “weapons of mass destruction” and “biological pathogens.” He said the new information was “sobering news, not just about the intent of our enemies but of their specific plans and a glimpse into their methods.”

A senior Homeland Security official said that this new information was received by the intelligence community “sometime on Friday” and was “so specific they immediately began trying to corroborate it.” Ridge announced that “we won’t do politics” with terror alerts and then reminded Americans that Bush was personally responsible for saving them: “We must understand that the kind of information available to us today is the result of the president’s leadership in the war against terror.”

The terror alert resulted in the posting of heavily armed, black-clad lawmen outside the stock exchanges and the major banks in both New York and Newark. Truck searches and closures of major roads created huge traffic jams in the Big Apple.

But after the press conference spurred gasps across the land and stole the Democrats’ thunder, news trickled out that the alert was based on evidence gathered before 9/11. Two days after his announcement, Ridge conceded that there was “no evidence of recent surveillance” by terrorist suspects of the buildings and areas placed under heightened alert. But he stressed, “I don’t want anyone to disabuse themselves of the seriousness of this information simply because there are some reports that much of it is dated; it might be two or three years old.”

On August 12, the Associated Press reported that a White House official conceded that “the Bush administration has discovered no evidence of imminent plans by terrorists to attack U.S. financial buildings.” But the lack of evidence did not prevent them from maintaining a high-alert status.

On September 13, Ashcroft held a conference call with all 93 U.S. attorneys around the nation to warn of new terrorist threats. Michael Shelby, the Bush administration's appointee as chief U.S. attorney in Texas, was reported to have declared at a meeting of the Southern District of the Anti-Terrorism Advisory Council shortly after the conference call that the call had revealed "the high probability that a terrorist incident of the magnitude of the 9/11 attacks would occur in the United States within the next six weeks." On September 23, FoxNews Network, picking up on the reports of the conference call, quoted one law-enforcement official's warning that "every day there is new information that raises the level of anxiety."

Politics and terrorism warnings

In early October, a Bush advisor told the *Washington Post* that the president's reelection campaign's strategy aimed to stoke public fears about terrorism. A few days before the election, a video of Osama bin Laden popped up in which the terrorist leader warned, "Your security is in your own hands. Any nation that does not attack us will not be attacked." A Bush-Cheney campaign official gleefully told the New York *Daily News*, "We want people to think 'terrorism' for the last four days. And anything that raises the issue in people's minds is good for us." A senior GOP strategist, describing the bin Laden video as a "little gift" for the Bush campaign, added that "anything that makes people nervous about their personal safety helps Bush."

After all the alerts and sweating, America miraculously obliterated the terrorist threat on Election Day. Ashcroft, in a resignation letter dated November 2 and publicly released a week later, informed Bush, "The objective of securing the safety of Americans from crime and terror has been achieved." After Bush's victory was secure, the feds also canceled the heightened terrorist alerts for New York, Newark, and Washington, D.C. There was no evidence that the risk was lower simply because Ashcroft was resigning. In the days before Bush's second inaugural, the feds again reduced terror warnings — perhaps seeking to make Republican donors less timid about coming to Washington to express their gratitude to Bush.

Shortly after resigning in 2005, Ridge complained that the Bush administration often raised the terrorist-alert level on the basis of flimsy evidence. He spoke out to "debunk the myth" that his department was to blame for the frequent alerts. He declared, "More often than not we were the least inclined to raise it.... There were times when some people were really aggressive about raising it, and we said, 'For that?'"

Election-season terror alerts placed Americans in a psychological crossfire — warning them again and again, vaguely but ominously, and then implicitly promising that their government would protect them. Terror alerts might have made the difference on Election Day. Robb Willer, assistant director of the Sociology and Small Groups Laboratory at Cornell University, examined the relationship between 26 government-issued terror warnings reported in the *Washington Post* and Bush's approval ratings. "Each terror warning from the previous week

corresponded to a 2.75 point increase in the percentage of Americans expressing approval for President Bush,” Willer concluded. Apparently, the more terrorists there were who wanted to attack America, the better job Bush was doing.

The Founding Fathers hoped that the American people would continue to have the virtues and confidence necessary to perpetuate liberty. Insofar as government is increasingly relying on fear to secure support and submission, government degrades the people. And the more degraded people become, the easier it is for politicians to frighten them into further submission. But the mass production of bogus fears can never produce real legitimacy.

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