

## ***THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS UNSEEN***

**By Michael Ventura**

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On Nov. 21, *The New York Times* reported FBI Director Robert S. Mueller's dictum that local crime "will no longer be a basis for [the FBI's] regional priority setting." Four hundred agents have been taken off ongoing criminal investigations and reassigned to anti-terrorism. The *Times* noted that "the number of agents working narcotics cases dropped 45%, bank fraud cases dropped 31%, and bank robbery investigations dropped 25% ... even though the number of crimes in some cases went up." This, though rural areas across America are being inundated with drugs by smuggling operations beyond the power of local police outfits to deal with, while state governments are in their worst financial crisis since the Depression and are cutting back on police. On Dec. 8, the *Times* reported that "the rate of serious crime in Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Utah is as much as 50% higher than the state of New York. ... Towns of 10,000 and 25,000 people are now the most likely places to experience a bank robbery. Drug-related homicides ... tripled over the last decade in the countryside." It's not a great time for the FBI to be cutting back on criminal investigations.

Especially when you consider this -- a report that should have been on the front page but was shoved to page 16 of *The New York Times* on Dec. 13: "The nation's top general for domestic security says he has seen little evidence to suggest an imminent terrorism threat inside the United States by members of al Qaeda's network, and warns against using 'McCarthyism' in combating terror. 'I am not aware of a significant threat to this nation from so-called sleeper cells,' said the officer, Gen. Ralph E. Eberhart." Eberhart heads the military's new Northern Command, which oversees the Pentagon's domestic counter-terrorism efforts. Said the *Times* in its modest fashion: "The general, a four-star Air Force officer who has access to much of the same intelligence that President Bush receives ... *appeared to contradict* pronouncements from senior law enforcement officials, including Attorney General John Ashcroft. [My italics]" Appeared?! He flatly contradicted a year's worth of Justice Department and White House statements, yet this was not deemed a leading story by the press, the networks, or cable news. Incredibly, the Bush administration has not been called upon to comment about General Eberhart's evaluation; not surprisingly, nothing further has been heard from the general.

Try to make sense of this: On the one hand, the FBI is ignoring a rural crime wave and reassigning agents to a terrorist threat that Gen. Eberhart says does not exist; on the other hand, as *The Week* reported on Dec. 13, "The Bush administration has delayed sending local agencies \$1.5 billion in federal aid to help them respond to terrorist attacks." Why would Bush restructure the FBI to fight terrorism while denying funds to local police to fight that same terrorism? If anyone has a logical answer, I'd love to hear it. This stunning inconsistency of policies is the *real* story -- but no one is reporting it that way.

Something else that should have been a banner headline but was buried within a *New York Times* report on Dec. 9: "In private, administration officials concede that there is no single piece of dramatic intelligence that Iraq has continued to try to acquire nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons." Three days before, the *Times* reported that "a senior administration official tonight said that 'the President of the United States and the

Secretary of Defense would not assert as plainly and bluntly as they have that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction if it was not true, and if they did not have a solid basis for saying it." No reporter confronted this "senior administration official" with the obvious truth: It is a matter of record that presidents and their cabinets have often lied outright to shape policy and public opinion. In the same story, which appeared just a few days before Iraq submitted its 12,000-page weapons report, UN weapons inspector Hans Blix said that when that report appears "it will be time for those who say they have evidence to put this evidence on the table." As of this writing, Bush has yet to produce any evidence whatsoever.

The administration almost daily impugns the integrity of UN inspectors in Iraq, yet those inspectors have repeatedly begged Bush for the evidence he claims to have -- with no result. On Dec. 31, *The Los Angeles Times* quoted from an extensive interview with an inspector who spoke on condition of anonymity: "We need help. We need information. We need intelligence reports, if they really exist. ... If the United States wants us to find something, they should open their intelligence file and share it with us so that we know where to go. ... I must say that if we were to publish a report now, we have would have zilch to put in it." The paper summed up the interview: "The chemical experts haven't found a trace of the tons of chemical agents that Iraq is suspected of having. ... The nuclear inspectors found that the massive installations used to enrich uranium were practically undisturbed since they were decommissioned and sealed by the previous inspection team. ... The inspector said his colleagues think it possible that Iraq really has eliminated its banned material." As we've come to expect, no TV news show led with *that* story.

Administration spokesmen have repeatedly claimed that they are giving the inspectors intelligence data; just as often, the inspectors deny this (as politely as possible, never saying outright that Bush is lying). On Jan. 6, *The New York Times* reported that "with some weariness, Mr. Elbaradei [chief UN nuclear inspector] said ... that the [Bush] administration has not, even after six weeks of inspections, provided 'actionable information' to help in the search for clandestine facilities." Meanwhile, the only "evidence" repeatedly cited by Bush, Iraq's purchase of aluminum tubing that *might* be used to produce nuclear weapons, was dismissed on Jan. 9 by the International Atomic Energy Agency. On the same day inspectors said they've found no "smoking gun" in Iraq, but the Bush administration tried to spin that story as confirming that Iraq was not cooperating -- yet inspectors have time and again said the opposite, citing "complete" and "prompt" cooperation (Hans Blix's words) with every single inspection. As for the 12 empty artillery warheads that the mass media and the Bush administration made such a fuss about, Blix said they're "not very important," and other independent analysts agree.

Mainstream news outlets quietly report these contradictions almost every day, stating each side's case and timidly avoiding the obvious: The contradiction *is* the story. Every independent expert says Iraq is not a threat; the Bush administration insists otherwise, but offers no evidence. Clearly, Bush would display his evidence if he had any because such evidence would relieve him of major credibility problems not only in terms of world opinion but the opinion of the American electorate (half of whom, polls show, are uneasy and unconvinced). The headline should be: IS BUSH LYING? CAN HE PROVE HE'S NOT?

In a republic, the burden of proof is on the elected leader. That's the fundamental idea on which a republic is based: The leader answers to his people and must offer

verifiable reasons for his acts. If he can't or won't do that, and can't be made to do that, then we don't live in a republic anymore.

War is bad enough if there's good reason for it; without good reason, it's madness. And worse. On Jan. 8, *The New York Times* reported a United Nations analysis that should challenge every American. "As many as 500,000 people in Iraq could suffer injuries and require medical treatment if the United States ... launch[es] a war there. ... The report also estimates that about *3 million people* [my italics] across the country will face 'dire' malnutrition and require 'therapeutic feeding' ... as many as 900,000 refugees could require food and shelter." The question every American must ask is: Is it moral to inflict this on an innocent population, no matter who their leader is, without forthright evidence?

On Jan. 16, *The New York Times* reported Bush's answer to that sort of question: "Administration Suggests War Could Come Without Full Evidence on Weapons." The White House said "it could decide in favor of military action even if weapons inspectors do not turn up concrete new evidence against Saddam Hussein." In other words, the United States of America is prepared to commit an act of unprovoked aggression -- against a country that just happens to have 10% of the world's oil reserves. If history has one most-repeated lesson, it is that terrible consequences await a nation that behaves as our nation is on the verge of behaving.

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