

## ***WEAPONS OF MASS DECEPTION***

**By Michael Ventura**

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In the days following 9/11, George W. Bush began speaking of "homeland security." Even then, some of us thought the phrase had a sinister, Orwellian ring. Bush proposed a White House Office of Homeland Security subject to no will but the president's -- no congressional oversight, no balance of constitutional powers, no accountability to the people. In the ensuing months a free press and some notable Democrats attacked the idea; the Democrats' counterproposal was a cabinet-level agency of Homeland Security, mandated by Congress and answerable to Constitutional checks and balances. Bush appeared to accede to this pressure and to accept the concept of a cabinet-level Homeland Security Department, mandated and overseen by the people's representatives. Most Americans think that's what they got when Congress recently passed the Homeland Security Act. What we really got was an intimidated Congress, frightened of appearing "soft on terrorism," which supplied Bush with the basic governmental structure necessary for a totalitarian America. These words no doubt sound extreme; perhaps they won't when you examine some details of your new Department of Homeland Security.

The new department will employ 170,000 people -- making it second only to the Pentagon as our largest government institution. Under its authority will be the Customs Service, the Coast Guard, the Secret Service, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Border Patrol, and the Transportation Security Administration, to name a few. *The New York Times* reports that the bill "provides the new department with what congressional officials say is unprecedented power for a federal agency to organize itself as it chooses, without congressional oversight or interference" (authority "demanded by the Bush administration"). With the Secret Service and other law enforcement agencies under its control, Homeland Security will constitute an intelligence-gathering institution of massive proportions. "Administration officials acknowledge," says the *Times*, "that the Department of Homeland Security could eventually emerge as a rival to the FBI as a domestic intelligence-gathering agency." Language added to the bill since the recent election "allows the administration to reorganize the department after it is created." What this means in the real world is that essential security services (the Secret Service, the Coast Guard, and the Border Patrol) will no longer be subject to congressional "interference"; will no longer have to account for themselves to the people; and will no longer be answerable to any but the White House, which can institute any changes it wants in the new department without going to the people for approval. And the administration already admits that Homeland Security could become a super-FBI operating without any of the FBI's present constitutional constrictions.

In addition, the 170,000 Homeland Security employees will be stripped of civil service protections. This proposal was couched as a money-saving, anti-union tactic that would give the new department "flexibility" (Bush's word). What it means in everyday reality is the department will exert complete control over its employees, who will no doubt face severe consequences for acts of conscience (such as telling their fellow Americans what Homeland Security is really up to).

The Department of Homeland Security will include an Office of Information Awareness, employing a system that is being called Total Information Awareness: a massive computer database combining information from intelligence agencies with information gathered by commercial companies. Here is conservative columnist William Safire's description:

"This is what will happen to you. Every purchase you make with a credit card, every magazine subscription you buy and medical prescription you fill, every Web site you visit and e-mail you send or receive, every academic grade you receive, every bank deposit you make, every trip you book and every event you attend -- all these transactions and communications will go into what the Defense Department describes as 'a virtual centralized grand database.' To this computerized dossier on your private life from commercial sources, add every piece of information that government has about you -- passport application, driver's license and bridge toll records, judicial and divorce records, complaints from nosy neighbors to the FBI, your lifetime paper trail plus the latest hidden camera surveillance -- and you have the super-snoop's dream: a 'Total Information Awareness' about every U.S. citizen ... [the new agency] has been given a \$200 million budget to create computer dossiers on 300 million Americans."

What is the rationale for this "Office of Information Awareness"? Not the "war on terrorism." None of the 9/11 attackers were American citizens; they would have barely shown up on such a database. The two or three Americans who have been connected to al Qaeda have been, by the government's own admission, low-level functionaries who posed no direct threat to public safety. "Total Information Awareness" is a war not on terrorism but on liberty. It's about terrorizing *us* -- for when people know their every move is being recorded by the government, they are apt to be cautious, self-doubting, and self-censoring, lest they draw the attention of the authorities. "Total Information Awareness" - - total as in *totalitarian*. That is the root of the word: *total* government control and coercion of the *total* range of human activity, for which the government requires (and will soon have) *total* information.

The Office of Information Awareness isn't an Orwellian fantasy. Thanks to a confused, timid, pliant Congress, it is now the law of the land. This "office," by the way, is under the command of John Poindexter. Remember him? In the Reagan administration, it was his idea to sell Iran missiles in exchange for American hostages, and then to use that money to fund an illegal (by U.S. and international law) "contra" movement against socialist Nicaragua -- "Iran/Contra" was his baby, and he was convicted on six counts for his crimes (one of them being that he lied to Congress under oath). But Poindexter served no prison time; Congress, you see, had granted him immunity. It is to Poindexter that every piece of information about your life is now being entrusted.

Add to this mix the rulings of America's new secret court. *The New York Times* reported that on Nov. 18 "a special federal appeals court" ruled "that the Justice Department has broad new powers ... the judges said today that the passage of [last year's USA PATRIOT Act] ensured that there is no wall between officials from the intelligence and criminal arms of the Justice Department ... Applications for criminal warrants must comply with the Fourth Amendment's proscriptions against intrusive searches and require an official declaration that there is 'probable cause' to believe the subject is involved in a crime. By contrast, the intelligence surveillance law requires only a showing that there is a probable cause that the subject is the agent of a foreign power," which could mean anything. "Today's ruling was a significant victory for Attorney General John Ashcroft, who announced immediately that he would use it to *greatly expand* [my italics] the use of

the special intelligence court by prosecutors to obtain wiretaps." A *New York Times* editorial commented that this appeals court's proceedings "are held in secret, and *the government is the only party allowed to appear before it*. [My italics; i.e., no other opinions are allowed legal representation in this court.] The members of the court are hand-picked by Chief Justice William Rehnquist ... The combination of one-sided arguments and one-sided judges hardly instills confidence in the court's decisions." What all this amounts to is an unprecedented shift of power not only from Congress to the presidency, but from the Constitution to the presidency. The essential idea of the Constitution -- that the president is answerable to Congress and to free courts -- has been subverted, gutted. More power is now concentrated in the White House than at any time in our history. We have taken a huge step from a republic to ... the opposite of a republic. We are living in redefined America. The groundwork has been laid. The price has yet to be paid. You'll pay it, and sooner than you think. Yes: you. And me. And every other American. The word is *totalitarian*. There will be no exemptions.

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