

SQUEAKS IN THE DIN

By Michael Ventura

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We're getting used to it. We must be -- or surely the events of the last month would cause an uproar, a protest beyond the squeaks-in-the-din of a few (very few) journalists. Surely editors would have run banner headlines, even a year ago, about news now stuffed into short bits deep in their papers. Surely, for instance, in days not-far past, Bush would have been peppered by questions when the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported a month ago that air pollution kills as many as secondhand smoke -- residents of Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York are *16 times* more likely to develop lung cancer than those of cleaner towns (ditto heart disease). Yet no one made Bush answer for his laxity on enforcing stricter auto emissions, though his inaction will destroy far more Americans than 9/11's terrorists. Instead, headlines are reserved for any time the president happens to say the word "evil."

Or take *The New York Times* report May 30 that European agencies had "widespread hints" of an imminent terrorist air attack on the U.S. which they shared with our government. Surely that deserved more comment, especially when you recall that last spring Vice-President Dick Cheney was put in charge of anti-terror preparations at the same time that Attorney General John Ashcroft rejected proposals that his Justice Department spend more money and time on terrorism. Yet no one dreams of holding Cheney and Ashcroft accountable; no one asks them serious questions. Instead, also on May 30, Robert Mueller, who didn't become director of the FBI until a week before Sept. 11, took all the heat: *FBI Chief Admits 9/11 Might Have Been Detectable*.

Americans sat mute as President Bush, on June 1, announced that it will be the policy of the United States, against international agreements to which America has been a signatory for more than half a century, to strike first whenever and wherever he sees fit. What's happened to Congress having sole power to commit our military to war? What's happened to Congressional oversight? Where is there a hint that this government owes its citizens and the world proof before embarking upon drastic acts? Where is there any consideration of Jefferson's words: "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind requires that they [meaning Jefferson, Washington, Madison, Franklin, Adams, etc.] should declare the causes which impel them ..."? Jefferson then gave a long list of specifics which accounts for the bulk of our Declaration of Independence.

(Early this month, when Bush ordered American troops on combat patrols in the jungles of the Philippines, the news was handled so gently most Americans probably never heard it.)

On June 3, William Safire squeaked in the din, in *The New York Times*, about new FBI guidelines. Old guidelines held that "if a lead showed 'reasonable indication of criminal activity,' agents could initiate a full investigation ... Under the new Ashcroft-Mueller diktat, that necessary hint of potential criminal activity is swept away. *With not a scintilla of evidence of a crime being committed* [his italics], the feds will be able to run full investigations ... Consider the new reach of federal power: [your] income tax return ... academic scores and personnel ratings, credit card purchases ... political and charitable contributions ... subscription[s] ... every visit to every Web site and comment to every chat room, and every book or movie you bought or even considered on Amazon.com ...

[a]ll your personal data is right there, at the crossroads of modern marketing and federal law enforcement. And all in the name of the war on terror. This is not some nightmare of what may happen someday. It happened last week."

On the same day government scientists predicted a disastrous future for American agriculture due to climate change. Bush said merely that he'd read the report "of the bureaucrats" and that the U.S. would have to "adapt." He offered no proposals to aid the very people who support him most in the agricultural lands of the Midwest and South. He was never seriously questioned about this. The agricultural areas that he's hanging out to dry didn't raise a peep.

Three days later FBI agent Colleen Rowley testified before Congress about the appalling laxity of the FBI in processing information about terrorists -- a failure Attorney General Ashcroft, terrorism czar Dick Cheney, and their commander, George W. Bush, permitted on their watch (as had Clinton and Bush I). To squash those headlines and get the heat off his administration, while Rowley was testifying Bush released plans for a Homeland Security cabinet post -- an idea he'd rejected every time it was proposed since 9/11. Rowley and the FBI's failure were swept off the headlines, and Bush again had no uncomfortable questions to answer -- though his proposals were vague at best.

Two days later Bush announced all missile test data would in the future be kept secret -- though the missile shield has nothing to do with terrorism. Thus there will be no way for citizens or Congress to judge whether a missile shield is feasible. Again, barely a squeak anywhere. But there will be a windfall in the billions for Cheney-Rumsfeld-Bush's defense contractor cronies. Billions paid with our taxes. But we are to have no information, no say.

Meanwhile, that week, the Dow went down 335 points. It's been wildly swinging up and down by hundreds of points nearly every day since, hovering close to where the numbers were on the day after the 9/11 attack. Such a frantic, fragile market would have made headlines any other year. But we're taking it for granted. And no one is holding this administration accountable. Incredible.

Then: June 11 *The New York Times'* carefully headlined, *U.S. SAYS IT HALTED QAEDA PLOT TO USE RADIOACTIVE BOMB* appears. "Says" is the operative word. No evidence was cited against an American citizen, Jose Padilla, though he's been arrested and held without permission to see his lawyer. Newspaper investigations showed Padilla to be a none-too-bright Brooklyn thug who converted to Islam. *An American citizen is being held incommunicado, without evidence of any kind nor any form of judicial review.* That's against the law. Under our Constitution the government must prove in court that there is sufficient cause for detention. Anything less is tyranny. If they can disappear Padilla, they can disappear you and disappear me -- all they need do is say they have a reason.

In any other era this would have galvanized America. Imagine if Nixon or Clinton had done it. But our citizenry and elected representatives barely peeped, quacked, or squeaked.

That same day CNN carried a Bush speech live. "STRENGTHENING SECURITY," read the bottom-screen caption. Bush's backdrop curtain showed "Protect the Homeland" repeated many times while he said: "I'm callin' evil for what it is. Evil is evil." Meanwhile the bottom right of the screen noted stocks had fallen 128 points that day while the Nasdaq fell lower than it had September 12 -- a poor indicator of secure strength. Only a moron could feel secure in a society that, the day before, demonstrated

that its people no longer have "inalienable rights," for any citizen can now be arrested without evidence and detained without judicial hearing.

The next day even *The New York Times* had nothing about Padilla on page one; the story was relegated to page 20. But *USA Today* courageously made front page news of how Attorney General Ashcroft lied about Padilla's "dirty bomb," quoting hawkish Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz as he admitted: "I don't think there was actually a plot beyond some fairly loose talk and [Padilla] coming in here obviously to plan further deeds." So an American citizen is being held against the law because of "some fairly loose talk" which the administration construes as "obviously" indicating "further deeds." Further than what? Even Ashcroft never claimed that Padilla committed earlier terrorist "deeds."

Said Abraham Lincoln, the first great Republican: "When shall we expect the approach of danger? Shall some transatlantic giant step the earth and crush us at a blow? Never. All the armies of Europe and Asia could not by force take a drink from the Ohio River or make a track on the Blue Ridge in the trial of a thousand years. If destruction be our lot we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of free men we will live forever, or die by suicide."

With inaction, inattention, cowardice, and stupidity, Americans are watching tyranny take shape in plain sight before our eyes, while the overwhelming majority say and do nothing. A fact which history will judge to be: suicide.

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