

THE SHADOW OF TOTALITARIANISM

By Michael Ventura

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Senator Robert C. Byrd, 84-year-old conservative Democrat of West Virginia, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, one of the most powerful and knowledgeable elected officials in Washington: "In this war on terrorism, Congress, by and large, has been left to learn about major war-related decisions through newspaper articles. One day we hear that American military advisers are heading to the Philippines. Another day we read that American military personnel may go to the former Soviet republic of Georgia. The next day we are sending advisers into Yemen. And, oh yes, we also learn from news reports that we have a shadow government in our own back yard, composed of unknown bureaucrats, up and running at undisclosed locations, for an indeterminate length of time."

Sen. Byrd and the ranking Republican of the Appropriations Committee, Sen. Ted Stevens of Alaska, asked Homeland Security director Tom Ridge to testify before their committee -- they're curious about how the \$38 billion Bush wants for Ridge's office will be spent. Republican Senator Richard C. Shelby of Alabama, ranking GOP member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, also wants Congress to hear from Ridge. But Bush refuses to let Ridge testify.

As to that "shadow" government mentioned by Byrd: Sen. Chuck Hagel, Republican of Nebraska, declared it a mistake for the White House to allow Congress to remain uninformed. *The New York Times'* Maureen Dowd reported that even Senate majority leader Thomas Daschle hadn't learned of the existence of such a "government" until he'd read of it in *The Washington Post*. Daschle said, "We have not been informed at all about the role of the shadow government or its whereabouts or what particular responsibilities they have and when they would kick in." Aides to GOP Rep. Dennis Hastert, speaker of the House, said even he had only a vague idea of what was going on -- yet the speaker would be president in an emergency so severe that Bush and Cheney were casualties. Though third in line, even Hastert has been left largely in the dark.

Add Vice-President Cheney's refusal to let our representatives in Congress know whom he met with while forging the Bush energy plan, and the Bush/Ashcroft Justice Department's stonewalling toward Congressional oversight committees in regard to FBI actions against the Mafia in Boston (in which, according to conservative *NY Times* columnist William Safire, "the FBI knowingly let an innocent man rot in prison for 30 years in order to protect the identity of an informant whom they knew had committed the murder"). Reticence on both these issues cannot in any way be justified by claims of national security. Commented Indiana Republican Rep. Dan Burton, in protest: "[The United States] is not a monarchy."

USA Today quoted even Larry Klayman, executive director of the Judicial Watch, a far-right group that hounded President Clinton relentlessly: "This is a case where left and right agree ... True conservatives don't act this way. We see an unprecedented secrecy in this White House that ... we find very disturbing."

You have to step back, take a breath, and realize: Without an active free press (especially *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times*) our elected representatives in Congress would know virtually nothing of most of the major

steps the Bush administration has taken not only since September 11, but since last spring. If America means to you a republic governed according to a Constitution that carefully stipulates checks and balances among the White House, Congress, and the judiciary -- a system in which none can overwhelm the others, and in which each is responsible to the others -- then you no longer live in that America. This is not some dire warning about the future. This has happened and is happening. A free press is noting the process step by step; braver members of Congress, Republican and Democrat, have voiced alarm and are attempting legal measures to exercise their constitutional duties (so far to no avail); watchdogs on the right and left agree on the urgency of the situation ... while most citizens say and do nothing, giving tacit approval to a new (yes, new!) de facto system of government that recognizes no obligation to obey or enforce the letter or spirit of the Constitution.

To repeat Klayman's statement (and he should know): "True conservatives don't act this way." A conservative, as I understand the term, believes in a strict (I would say restrictive) interpretation of the Constitution, the primacy of individual and economic liberty, and that the federal government be as confined as possible, ceding most power to state and local elective bodies. That does not describe the Bush administration at all. They ignore Congress almost completely on crucial issues; they feel no obligation to inform American citizens of the White House's deliberations or even of its policies(!), whether or not national security is at stake; they concentrate tremendous power among the very few. That is not conservatism. There is only one word that adequately describes the bent and preference of George W. Bush's White House: Totalitarian.

Which my dictionary defines as: "of or relating to a political regime based on the subordination of the individual to the state and strict control of all aspects of life esp. by coercive measures; also: advocating, constituting, or characteristic of such a regime."

Under our Constitution, individual citizens elect a president, senators, and representatives, who are answerable to each other. It's a complex, often messy, often raucous, usually unwieldy process -- and was meant to be. The idea of the Founders was that if a law or policy could make it through that funky process, then it was more often than not the will of the people. They designed Congress such that in the House the majority would hold sway and in the Senate minorities had to be taken into account (since any Senator can, at least in theory, obstruct the entire mechanism). To bypass or ignore Congress is to engage in "the subordination of the individual," since in a *republican* and *representative* form of government the individual enfranchises, and is in turn enfranchised by, his or her representative. Americans had better get wise that when the White House bypasses Congress it's bypassing you -- subordinating the individual to the state.

Of course any system in which 260 million people exercise joint political power is bound to be conflicted. On a daily basis, a certain amount of aggravation is quite literally the cost of liberty: You can't entirely get your way, but you can be comforted nevertheless by the fact that I can't entirely get mine. It is precisely in how you can't have it all your own way that I am free. It is precisely in how I can't have it all my own way that you are free. What's most frustrating about the American system -- the difficulty we each have of getting precisely our own way -- is the very condition and assurance of our liberty. I can't make you live as I would want and you can't make me live as you would want. Therefore, I'm free from you and you're free from me. It always seems as though the other side is winning more than we are and certainly more than we'd like. But your frustration is the measure of my freedom and mine is the measure of yours. So it's good

that we're aggravated -- because we can accurately gauge the available freedom by the extent of our own aggravation. You'll be pissed off one day, or one decade, and I'll be pissed off another. Because we can't entirely have our way. If I could you wouldn't be free and if you could I wouldn't be free. Welcome to America as the Founders envisioned America.

But that's not the America of the George W. Bush White House -- not before September 11, and certainly not since. The cruel, gruesome fact is that September 11 is the best thing that ever happened to the Bush totalitarians: They have shamelessly taken advantage of the 3,000 who innocently died ... the sacrifice of hundreds of New York cops and firemen ... and of the immortal "Let's roll" of the citizens on that airliner, people whose democratic ideals went so deep that in the midst of the worst possible crisis they *voted* on what to do next. The George W. Bush White House is using the agony and nobility of those victims and heroes as an excuse to ignore *their* Constitution. Which could turn out to be the most dangerous travesty in which any American presidency has ever indulged.

Citizens, we must let them know what our Constitution means to us. We must assert our rights and force this administration to be republican democrats. What's at stake goes beyond any affiliation with left, center, or right. We can get back to those old arguments when we're once again governed by the principles of our Constitution.

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