

Coronavirus: What Newsweek Failed to Mention About “Continuity of Government”

By [Whitney Webb](#)

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Though often discussed in relation to nuclear war or a similarly chaotic scenario, “continuity of government” plans can be triggered even by popular, nonviolent opposition to an unpopular war abroad. It exists solely to keep the current system in place, regardless of the cost.

Last week, *Newsweek* published a report entitled “[Inside The Military’s Top Secret Plans If Coronavirus Cripples the Government](#),” which offers vague descriptions of different military plans that could be put into effect if the civilian government were to be largely incapacitated, with a focus on the potential of the current novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic to result in such a scenario.

The article’s author, William Arkin, largely frames these plans as new, though — buried deep within the article — he eventually mentions that such contingency plans can be traced back to the Eisenhower administration ([though they were in place before](#)) and have since been developed and updated by most subsequent administrations, largely through the issuance of executive orders. Arkin also points out that some of these “Continuity of Government”, or COG, plans include the “devolution” of leadership and Constitutional authority, which he notes “could circumvent the normal Constitutional provisions for government succession, and military commanders could be placed in control around America.”



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EXCLUSIVE: INSIDE THE MILITARY'S TOP SECRET PLANS IF CORONAVIRUS CRIPPLES THE GOVERNMENT

BY WILLIAM M. ARKIN ON 3/18/20 AT 7:00 AM EDT

Yet, there are key aspects of COG and its development that Arkin leaves out. For instance, in his timeline on how such plans have developed in the post-World War II era, he conveniently fails to mention any of the Reagan administration's major changes to COG, including the Reagan-era Executive Order on which all current COG programs are based. Indeed, many of the "extra-Constitutional" aspects of COG that Arkin mentions began during the Reagan administration, when these plans were redrafted to largely exclude members of Congress, including the Speaker of the House, from succession plans and even moved to essentially eliminate Congress in the event of COG being implemented, with near total power instead being given to the executive branch and the military. It was also during this time that the "devolution" aspect of COG was hammered out, as it created three president-cabinet "teams" to be stationed in different parts of the country outside of the nation's capital. Arkin's decision to not mention how COG was a major focus of the Reagan administration is striking [given that](#) that administration poured hundreds of millions of dollars annually into COG planning and development and also conducted COG drills on a regular basis.

Furthermore, [the Miami Herald revealed](#) in 1987, that the COG programs of that era were deeply connected to what the *Herald* termed "a virtual parallel government outside the traditional cabinet departments and agencies" that began operating "almost from the day Reagan took office" and included military and intelligence operatives as well as many of Reagan's closest advisers, including then-CIA Director William Casey. The *Herald* further claimed that this "parallel government" had been responsible for the Iran-Contra scandal (i.e. "involved in arming the Nicaraguan rebels") as well as "the drafting of martial law plans for national emergencies," i.e. COG, as well as "the monitoring of U.S. citizens considered potential security risks." This "parallel government" [planned to use](#) COG to install itself as the ruling power of the country and to detain potential opponents of a U.S. war with Nicaragua in the event that the Reagan administration moved to invade the country.

[Other key players](#) in those Reagan-era COG developments, such as former Vice President Dick Cheney, former CIA Director James Woosley and former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, are also left unmentioned in Arkin's article. Not mentioning Cheney and Rumsfeld are particularly glaring omissions given that they were involved in the implementation of aspects of those COG plans that [went live](#) in the wake of the September 11 attacks, when both men were serving in key posts in the George W. Bush administration.

While Arkin's omission of the role of the Reagan administration and leading neoconservatives in the development and use of COG is significant, arguably more significant is his failure to mention one of COG's major components, one that has gone essentially unmentioned by well-known media outlets for well over a decade - Main Core.

The government's database of "potential troublemakers"

When Reagan issued [Executive Order 12656](#), he created COG plans that could be implemented during "any national security emergency," which the E.O. loosely defines as "any occurrence, including natural disaster, military attack, technological emergency, or other emergency, that seriously degrades or seriously threatens the national security of the United States." E.O. 12656 also put the National Security Council (NSC) in charge of

developing and administering COG policies.

The NSC official placed in charge of this “secret” COG program was Oliver North, whose name would later become infamous for the key role he played in the Iran-Contra Scandal. During the Iran-Contra hearings in the late 1980s, then-Representative Jack Brooks (D-TX) [attempted to ask](#) the following question to North: “Colonel North, in your work at the NSC, were you not assigned at one time to work on plans for the continuity of government in the event of a major disaster?” Brooks, however was immediately cut off by Senator Daniel Inouye (D-HI), who stated “ I believe that question touches upon a highly sensitive and classified area, so may I request that you not touch upon that, sir.” Brooks protested, but North was ultimately not required to give an answer.

As the *de facto* leader of COG development and planning during the Reagan administration, North oversaw the creation of a controversial database that later became known simply as “Main Core.” The Main Core database, first built using the stolen PROMIS software (more information on PROMIS [here](#) and [here](#)), was essentially a list of American dissidents and “potential troublemakers.” A senior government official with a high-ranking security clearance and service in five presidential administrations [described](#) the database to journalist Chris Ketcham in 2008 as follows:

A database of Americans, who, often for the slightest and most trivial reason, are considered unfriendly, and who, in a time of panic might be incarcerated. The database can identify and locate perceived ‘enemies of the state’ almost instantaneously.”

In 1993, [Wired magazine](#) stated that:

Using PROMIS, sources point out, North could have drawn up lists of anyone ever arrested for a political protest, for example, or anyone who had ever refused to pay their taxes. Compared to PROMIS, Richard Nixon’s enemies list or Sen. Joe McCarthy’s blacklist look downright crude.”

Main Core is the aspect of COG that is most often ignored in reporting on these types of plans, with Arkin’s article being just a more recent example. While most of the rare mentions of COG in the mainstream touch on how those plans would result in the implementation of martial law and the suspension of the Constitution, they even more rarely — if ever — mention Main Core. Indeed, the last “mainstream” reports on Main Core were written over a decade ago — all in 2008 — [by Chris Ketcham](#) in *Radar*, [by Scott Horton](#) in *Harper’s* and [by Tim Shorrock](#) in *Salon*.

Given that COG is now creeping back into mainstream reporting, revisiting Main Core is essential as the database still exists and has grown considerably since Oliver North first oversaw its creation in the early 1980s. In Ketcham’s 2008 article on the subject, he quotes then-senior government officials who said that, at the time, the number of “unfriendly” Americans on that database was approximately 8 million. Ketcham further notes that, in the event COG is implemented, these individuals could be subject to anything ranging from “heightened surveillance and tracking to direct questioning and possibly even detention.”

Tim Shorrock, in his coverage of Main Core, noted that the database was seen in use at the

White House following the September 11 attacks and there is strong evidence pointing to it having been used by the George W. Bush administration to guide its domestic surveillance activities in the post-9/11 era. A government official who had told a reporter about having seen the database operational at the White House following September 11th “turned white as a sheet” when the reporter mentioned the name “Main Core” specifically. Shorrock’s reporting also details how Main Core includes vast amounts of information on those “unfriendly” Americans, including the fruits of the vast domestic surveillance programs of the NSA and other U.S. federal agencies that continue today and are now set to be expanded due to the current coronavirus crisis.

In [a report](#) written last year on the involvement of U.S. and Israeli intelligence and their private sector allies in pushing for new, troubling pre-crime programs, I noted that Main Core is not only available to U.S. intelligence but also Israel’s intelligence apparatus and that Israeli intelligence was involved in the creation and expansion of Main Core. That report also detailed how Main Core was used by members of Reagan’s NSC to blackmail members of Congress, a practice that is likely to have continued under subsequent administrations. It also noted how Main Core today likely involves the same software now used by every U.S. intelligence agency and numerous other federal agencies that is marketed by Palantir, a company created and owned by Trump ally Peter Thiel. Palantir’s software boasts “predictive policing” capabilities and tracks a category of person using the label “subversive,” very much in keeping with the spirit of Main Core.

Main Core and Bill Barr’s Power Grab

Though Main Core was reportedly in use after September 11 to target “unfriendly” individuals for increased domestic surveillance, concern that COG plans in the age of coronavirus could take a more drastic turn and involve the detention of Americans included in that database now seems more plausible than ever. On Saturday, [Politico reported](#) that the Department of Justice has demanded new “emergency powers” during the current pandemic and these powers include being able to indefinitely detain Americans without trial. *Politico* also noted that the DOJ’s controversial new requests “span several stages of the legal process, from initial arrest to how cases are processed and investigated.” Per the DOJ’s requests, indefinite detention would emerge through a new ability whereby the Attorney General or a judge could pause court proceedings whenever courts are “fully or partially closed by virtue of any natural disaster, civil disobedience, or other emergency situation.”

What [Politico](#) did not include in its report is that current Attorney General William Barr has spent the past several months fine-tuning and implementing [a “pre-crime” program](#). Officially known as the “National Disruption and Early Engagement Program” (DEEP), it aims to “identify, assess and engage” potentially violent individuals “before they strike.” Barr first announced this program last October in [an official memorandum](#) and therein stated that the program was to be implemented sometime over the course of 2020 and would involve “an efficient, effective and programmatic strategy to disrupt individuals who are mobilizing towards violence, by all lawful means.”

A training conference for that program took place this past December and involved members of the Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation and “private sector partners.” One [recent DOJ statement](#) regarding an arrest made last year in Nevada, claimed that that specific case was part of the DOJ’s “National Disruption and Early Engagement Program,” suggesting that this program is already in use — at least in some parts of the

country.

In his memorandum, Barr further notes that the program's "early engagement tactics" were "born of the posture we adopted with respect to terrorist threats" following the September 11 attacks, essentially stating that this pre-crime program will utilize methods from the "War on Terror" domestically and on a massive scale.

Given the context of the current coronavirus crisis, the DOJ's recent request for sweeping new powers and the role of Main Core in COG plans, one part of Barr's pre-crime memorandum stands out. In the part of the document where Barr outlines what actions will be taken once an individual is deemed potentially violent or threatening, he writes that those individuals will be subject to detention, court-ordered mental health treatment and electronic monitoring, among other measures.

The possibility of pre-crime detention was also present in the DOJ's recent request for new "emergency powers" in light of the coronavirus crisis, as it specifically asks that those new powers apply to "any statutes or rules of procedure otherwise affecting pre-arrest, post-arrest, pre-trial, trial, and post-trial procedures in criminal and juvenile proceedings and all civil process and proceedings." Norman L. Reimer, executive director of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, [told Politico](#) that the inclusion of the term "pre-arrest" likely means that "you could be arrested and never brought before a judge until they decide that the emergency or the civil disobedience is over. I find it absolutely terrifying."

Thus, if DOJ is granted these new powers it has requested, the William Barr-led Department of Justice will not only be authorized to indefinitely detain Americans without trial, it will be able to detain them without any proof of those detainees having committed a crime or even having plans or the intent to commit a crime. Instead, the DOJ only needs to argue that the individual was "mobilizing towards violence," an extremely vague phrase that could potentially be used against anyone who expresses discontent with the government or government policy.

Furthermore, with the FBI having recently flagged "conspiracy theorists" (and by extension those who distrust or question government narratives of both past and present) as a "domestic terror threat," the DOJ could even make the case that failure to blindly trust government narratives presents a threat to the public order. Given that the Main Core database in its current form contains bulk surveillance gathered from social media, phone conversations/messaging apps and even financial information (i.e. purchasing history, etc.) on Americans deemed unfriendly "often for the slightest and most trivial reason," this unprecedented power grab by the DOJ has an authoritarian and Orwellian potential to target legitimate dissent like never before.

With the specter of COG now snaking its way into mainstream discourse during the coronavirus crisis, it is essential that Americans stay vigilant, as these Orwellian and dystopian "solutions" to allegedly protect us from the current pandemic have been in place long before COVID-19 made its appearance on the world stage or landed on U.S. shores.

It is also essential to remember that COG, Main Core and the DOJ's pre-crime program were all created and are currently controlled by extremely corrupt and fundamentally untrustworthy individuals who have not only [been involved in innumerable scandals over the years](#), but have also [installed and supported](#) some of the most [authoritarian](#), [savagely](#) and [horrific](#) dictators the world has ever seen. To trust *them* with

such unprecedented and dangerous powers in a period of national confusion and panic is tantamount to beckoning the horrors of those dictatorships — past and present — to come home to roost.

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Whitney Webb is a MintPress News contributing journalist based in Chile. She has contributed to several independent media outlets including Global Research, EcoWatch, the Ron Paul Institute and 21st Century Wire, among others. She has made several radio and television appearances and is the 2019 winner of the Serena Shim Award for Uncompromised Integrity in Journalism.

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