

The politics of the latest terror scare

Neither the British nor the US government has produced facts to substantiate their claims

By [Barry Grey](#)

Global Research, August 18, 2006

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 18 August 2006

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Five days after UK authorities arrested 24 British-born Muslims and announced that they and their American counterparts had thwarted a plot to blow up trans-Atlantic flights from London to the US, neither the British nor the American government has produced any facts to substantiate their dire claims.

No details of the supposed plot have been provided, and no hard evidence that would justify the arrest of so many people or the imposition of chilling security measures that had wreaked havoc at airports in the US and Britain.

In the meantime, commercial flights are being turned around in mid-flight, and wild claims of new plots are hitting the newsstands. The latest was the arrest of three Palestinian-Americans who were hauled into jail in Michigan after they purchased some 80 cell phones from a Wal-Mart store. Local police discovered that one of them had a digital camera with an image of the Mackinac Bridge, which connects Michigan's upper and lower peninsulas. This was sufficient to charge them with conspiring, using cell phones as detonators, to attack the bridge.

This implausible "plot" was punctured on Monday when the FBI issued a statement that none of the three were connected to any known terrorist groups, that buying cell phones was not a crime, and that the Mackinac Bridge was in no danger. Family members explained that the three bought and sold cell phones to make a living. The incident was, however, indicative of the atmosphere of hysteria that is being encouraged by the Bush administration. (As of this writing, moreover, the three suspects remain in jail).

Unless and until hard facts are presented, the entire airline terror plot must be viewed with the gravest suspicion.

On NBC TV's "Today" program Monday morning, Lisa Myers, reporting from London, said British authorities were complaining that they had less evidence than they wanted against the alleged plotters because the Bush administration insisted that the timing of the arrests be brought forward by a week. The British, according to Myers, had planned to wait until the supposed conspirators carried out a "dry run" of their plot.

That British officials are privately expressing concerns about a lack of evidence raises serious questions as to whether there are clear and convincing facts that those arrested had anything to do with the alleged plot, or that such a conspiracy existed.

Myers' revelation reinforces previous reports that the British government had objected to

claims by US officials that the alleged plot was linked to Al Qaeda. These developments suggest that far from thwarting a nefarious plot on the eve of its implementation, the British government came under pressure from Washington to participate in a massive provocation, and that once more it knuckled under to US demands.

The lack of facts has not prevented the mainstream media, especially in the US, from uncritically accepting the official claims and embellishing them with commentaries by “terrorist experts” about Al Qaeda connections, home-grown terrorist cells and similar hypotheses, all of which are calculated to create a climate of fear and intimidation.

Nevertheless, buried in the reams of newspaper articles and hours of television commentary are bits and pieces of information that cast further doubt on the substantiality of the official claims. Thus Monday’s *USA Today*, in an article headlined “Fearing Wider US Plot, Investigators Raced Clock,” noted the following: “There was also no immediate evidence that any of the suspects had purchased tickets for future flights, although British authorities have indicated some of the suspects had allegedly reviewed flight schedules and were honing in on specific flights.”

Yet British and American officials stated at the time of the arrests last week that the airline attack was “imminent.”

To make the entire affair more suspect, the NBC news program Monday evening reported that British authorities had discovered “new evidence” that led them to alter their approach to their ongoing investigation. What was this “new evidence?” And how could it significantly alter an investigation that had supposedly thwarted an imminent attack? These questions were not even raised.

Despite the lack of factual substantiation, official threat levels have been raised and so-called security measures have been introduced that have created chaos in the air transport system and subjected the American and British people to police-military methods that violate their privacy and infringe on their democratic rights.

Twenty-three British citizens remain in jail, under conditions, according to their lawyers, that make a mockery of due process and democratic rights. They have been denied contact with family members, have had virtually no contact with legal counsel, and are being subjected to abusive treatment, including confinement in freezing cells. They have been charged with no crimes, and, under recently passed British anti-terror laws, can be held without charge for up to 28 days.

The names and photos of most of the prisoners have been splashed across newspapers and their assets have been seized by the British Treasury, proving that the presumption of innocence is a dead letter in both Britain and the US.

These are the type of conditions that police agencies employ to terrorize suspects and extract damaging statements or confessions that are then cited to “prove” state allegations and prosecute defendants.

One thing is clear: the supposed plot has been seized on for transparently political purposes of a deeply reactionary character.

On Monday, British Home Minister John Reid announced that the official threat level in

Britain had been lowered from “critical” to “severe,” even as he suggested that there were many terrorist cells operating in Britain and revived the Labour government’s call for an extension of preventive detention to 90 days.

The day before, the US homeland security secretary, Michael Chertoff, made the rounds of Sunday talk shows and called for changes in US laws to make government spying even more pervasive and allow for preventive detention along British lines.

Why was the Bush administration so insistent that the alleged plot be exposed last Thursday? The answer has nothing to do with security considerations. It has, rather, to do with the machinations of the clique of political gangsters—Dick Cheney, Karl Rove, among others—who run the US government.

With their favorite Democrat, the rabidly pro-war senator and former vice presidential candidate, Joseph Lieberman, losing the Democratic primary in Connecticut to a political upstart running as an opponent of the Iraq war, Ned Lamont, it was urgent that this expression of mass antiwar and anti-Bush sentiment be shoved off the front pages and supplanted by a new round of fear-mongering and hysteria.

Likewise the revelations of US war crimes in Iraq and the torture of US prisoners at Guantánamo.

Even as Cheney was in discussions with the government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair over the impending terror scare, he held a rare press briefing to denounce the vote for Lamont as a boon to Al Qaeda. This bit of witch-hunting was then taken up by Lieberman himself, who slandered opposition to the Iraq war and to himself as tantamount to support for terrorism.

There undeniably is a conspiracy. It is a plot to use terrorist threats, real or imagined, to terrorize the American people, intimidate them, disorient them, and accustom them to accept the militarization of every aspect of their lives and the destruction of their democratic rights. The center of this conspiracy is the American government itself.

This is to be, in so far as Cheney and company have a say in the matter, the atmosphere in which the November elections are held.

What is the political context in which this latest terror scare takes place? Iraq has descended into civil war under the jackboot of American military occupation, Afghanistan is spiraling out of control, the US-Israeli war in Lebanon has ended in political failure, new opinion polls show Bush’s approval ratings once again sinking to record levels and antiwar sentiment rising to new heights.

An article in Monday’s *Washington Post* noted that Republican incumbents in the Northeast fear they could be wiped out in the November elections as a result of popular hatred for Bush and the war.

The answer of the Cheney-Rove conspirators is to engineer a new wave of panic and hysteria in an attempt to once again stampede voters behind Bush’s “war on terrorism.” They did the same in 2004, when in the run-up to the election the government suddenly announced a plot to attack major financial institutions in New York, Washington and Newark, New Jersey—a plot that came to nothing. And there was, at a convenient point in the election calendar, the sudden reemergence of Osama bin Laden with a taped message

reminding the American people that he was determined to wipe them out.

The fascist-minded denizens of America's secret government rely on the cowardice and complicity of the Democratic Party and the services of an utterly servile and corrupt media, which is itself heavily populated by outright agents of US intelligence agencies. Not a single mainstream newspaper or media outlet has challenged the claims of the government regarding the alleged airline terror plot.

What about the 24th alleged conspirator, who was quietly released by the British authorities from jail last week? Who is he? Why was he released? Was he perhaps the MI5 intelligence agent who reportedly infiltrated the group of alleged plotters? These questions are not even asked, let alone answered.

Why does the media take the government leaders in the US and Britain at their word? They all dragged their people into a war on the basis of lies. Bush stood before Congress, the Supreme Court and the American people in his 2003 State of the Union Address and lied about Iraq's supposed attempt to buy uranium from Niger. The US secretary of state went before the United Nations and delivered an extended brief for war that was packed with lies. Cheney is a serial prevaricator.

As for Tony Blair, he not only lied about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, he secretly sanctioned a shoot-to-kill policy that resulted in the police murder of an innocent worker, Jean Charles de Menezes, in the aftermath of last year's London train bombings.

The most important lesson that must be drawn from the current terror scare is just how far advanced the police state conspiracies are in the United States, and just how criminal are the methods of those who run the country.

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