

'Mad dictator' makes emergency power grab

by Kathleen Klenetsky

"There sure is a mad dictator loose in the world, but his name isn't Saddam Hussein. It's George Bush." So one Washington analyst characterized Bush's latest moves to use the Persian Gulf war to place the United States under a "national security" dictatorship.

Bush seized upon the opening stages of the war to implement several new emergency initiatives:

- On Jan. 18, the White House announced that Bush had authorized Defense Secretary Richard Cheney to call up as many as 1 million reservists, for terms of up to two years, to serve in Operation Desert Storm. As required by law, Bush utilized existing emergency powers to make that decision, bringing to at least four the number of times Bush has invoked such powers since August.

- The same day, the administration took another step toward placing the economy on a command footing, when Cheney issued a Military Airlift Command Order, allowing the Pentagon to commandeer as many as 181 planes owned by commercial passenger and cargo airlines, for use in the Gulf. That followed an Executive Order, issued by Bush on Jan. 9, requiring U.S. companies to give military contracts and orders priority over all other commerce.

- On Jan. 19, Washington radio station WTOP reported that Bush had recently signed three Executive Orders establishing strict wartime controls over all media coverage of the war, and authorizing the CIA and military intelligence to carry out a propaganda campaign whose theme would be that the United States was invincible.

Bush's drive toward emergency rule will likely be aided if the war lasts longer than its supporters predicted—which now seems inevitable—or in the event of a major terrorist upsurge, real or manufactured, at home.

The FBI and CIA have been fomenting hysteria about the prospects of terrorism. Using the specter of terrorist activities, the FBI has been conducting an outrageous intervention in the Arab-American community for over a month, sending out its agents to interview American citizens of Arab ancestry, allegedly to seek information about possible terrorist activity.

This intimidation campaign drew an angry attack from Reps. Don Edwards and Norm Mineta, both California Democrats, who rose on the floor of the House of Representatives on Jan. 16 to warn that such "government overreaction" to the war and its repercussions could lead to the wholesale abrogation of civil liberties.

Mineta, who was interned during World War II because of his Japanese ancestry, compared the FBI's activities to the roundup of Japanese-Americans and to McCarthyism: "The internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry during the Second World War was the culmination of a pattern of racism and hysteria. The same pattern may be at work today against Arab-Americans. . . . There was another time in our history when questions of this sort led to a tragedy of civil liberties. . . . This was the time of the blacklist."

Mineta noted that in the 1980s, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) had plans to "round up" Arab-Americans and place them in its "100-acre prison complex in Oakdale, Louisiana," which it had created as "a detention center for so-called undesirables."

Plans like this could be put into effect under current conditions, he warned. "Should terrorism hit at home as a result of war in the Middle East, I fear that there will be calls for wholesale arrests that go beyond probable cause. I fear there will be calls for internment. . . . The great Constitution of the United States of America must not be allowed to become a casualty of our conflict with Saddam Hussein."

Don Edwards, a former FBI agent who heads the Civil and Constitutional Rights subcommittee, raised similar concerns: "We must be alert to the threat that the Gulf confrontation and fear of terrorism will result in an overreaction here at home, making us less free."

The FBI's targeting of Arab-Americans has already produced ominous results: In Detroit, Mayor Coleman Young declared a state of emergency on Jan. 18, calling on the governor of Michigan to make National Guard troops available for duty in the city for the first time since the riots of 1968. Young said the deployment was necessary to guard against terrorist infiltration across the Canadian-Michigan border, as well as to protect Iraqi-American businessmen from violence.

FEMA moves in

Evidence is mounting that Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other components of the "emergency dictatorship" structure, is preparing to crack down on the anti-war movement. This news service received reports from anti-war activists, citing a FEMA employee, that FEMA held a meeting in mid-January, involving the top Pentagon brass and representatives of other government departments, to discuss how to handle domestic opposition to "foreign military operations."

A FEMA spokesman confirmed that the meeting took place, but refused to divulge its contents. Asked about charges that FEMA has plans to round up dissidents in a national emergency, he sputtered, "That's ridiculous!" But, he noted that "the old report that FEMA was going to round up minorities and put them in an internment camp in Louisiana" had been mentioned on a recent edition of the widely watched "Oprah Winfrey" television program.