



The Groundwork Has Already Been Laid for Martial Law

By **John W. Whitehead**
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During his two terms in office, George W. Bush stepped outside the boundaries of the Constitution and assembled an amazing toolbox of powers that greatly increased the authority of the Executive branch and the reach of the federal government.

Bush expanded presidential power to, among other things, allow government agents to secretly open the private mail of American citizens; authorize government agents to secretly, and illegally, listen in on the phone calls of American citizens and read our e-mails; assume control of the federal government following a "catastrophic event"; and declare martial law.

Thus, the groundwork was laid for an imperial presidency and a potentially totalitarian government--a state of affairs that has not ended with Barack Obama's ascension to the Oval Office, despite hopes to the contrary that President Obama would fully restore the balance between government and its citizens to a pre-Bush status quo. As Charlie Savage reports in the *New York Times*, "Signs suggest that the administration's changes may turn out to be less sweeping than many had hoped or feared--prompting growing worry among civil liberties groups and a sense of vindication among supporters of Bush-era policies."

The fact is that the problem is bigger than Obama or any individual who occupies the White House. Indeed, once the government assumes expansive powers and crosses certain constitutional lines, it's almost impossible to pull back.

Just consider some of the lines that have already been crossed.

The local police have, in many regards, already evolved into *de facto* extensions of the military. Dressed like Darth Vader look-alikes, the police have opted for the SWAT-team dress formally adopted by the federal agencies. Congressional legislation allows the U.S. military, by way of the Pentagon, to train civilian police. The Pentagon has also provided local police with military equipment such as M-16 rifles, bayonets, boats, vehicles, surveillance equipment, chemical suits and flak jackets, among other items. Thus, they are armed to the teeth.

We already have a federal police force comprised of Secret Service agents who are authorized to "carry firearms; make arrests without a warrant for any offense against the United States committed in their presence." A recent incident demonstrates the increased and immediate involvement of federal agents in local matters with the assistance of local police. Chip Harrison, a construction worker in Oklahoma, was pulled over by local police because of an anti-Obama sign proclaiming "Abort Obama, not the unborn" in his



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pickup truck window. The sign was confiscated by local police, and Harrison was informed that the sign could be considered a threat to the president. The local police contacted the Secret Service, who, within a matter of hours, came to Harrison's home and investigated the matter. So much for the freedom of expression.

According to the *Army Times*, we now have at least 20,000 U.S. military troops deployed within our borders to "help with civil unrest and crowd control or to deal with potentially horrific scenarios such as massive poisoning and chaos in response to a chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear or high-yield explosive, or CBRNE, attack." I am not alone in believing that we are just one incident--be it a terrorist attack, a major financial blowout or a widespread natural disaster--away from martial law being declared in this country. And once that happens, the Constitution and Bill of Rights will be suspended and what government officials believe and do, no matter how arbitrary, will become law.

Our methods of communication are already being monitored--and, in some instances, shut down, abetted by the telecommunications giants, which act as extensions of the government. Thus, not only does the government have the ability to open and read our mail, it can also listen in on our phone calls and jam our cell phone calls. As the *Washington Post* reports, federal authorities already have the ability to jam cell phones and other wireless devices. Unbeknownst to the nearly two million people who attended the Obama Inauguration festivities, federal authorities jammed cell phone signals at specific locations. Such disruptions simply appear to be a dropped call or lost signal. Of course, such jamming could be conducted on a more extensive basis nationwide. This would prevent citizens from being able to communicate with one another or make appeals to their government representatives. Although jamming is technically illegal for state and local agencies, Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.) plans to introduce legislation to allow local police to "selectively" jam cell phones.

We already live in a surveillance state. There was a time when people could flee when the government got out of control. Now, with our every movement monitored by cameras on sidewalks, streets, ATMs, and in shops, offices, schools and parks, there truly is nowhere to hide. Moreover, equipped with high-powered satellites and massive databases, the government can track us using our cell phones, cars, credit cards, driver's licenses and passports.

For those who have been paying attention, such as former war correspondent Chris Hedges in his *Truthdig* article, "Bad News From America's Top Spy," it's clear that the groundwork for a seamless transition into martial law under a totalitarian state of government has been laid. And local law enforcement, which has already been serving as a *de facto* military force, will be the key to maintaining martial law under a police state. Given the interconnectedness of our federal, state and local agencies, you can be sure that all of this will happen quickly.

All that is needed is another threat to national security--a so-called "catastrophic event." Under the Bush administration, the danger was terrorism. Under the Obama administration, the economy is being posed as the greatest threat to national security.

This danger was made clear in a U.S. Army War College report issued last fall. As Hedges reports, "The military must be prepared, the document warned, for a 'violent, strategic dislocation inside the United States,' which could be provoked by 'unforeseen economic collapse,' 'purposeful domestic resistance,' 'pervasive public health

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emergencies' or 'loss of functioning political and legal order.' The 'widespread civil violence,' the document said, 'would force the defense establishment to reorient priorities in extremis to defend basic domestic order and human security.'"

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What does all this mean for you and me, the average citizen? When and if martial law is declared, freedom, as we have known it, will be obsolete. And don't expect much in the way of warning or help from the corporate media. As the war in Iraq showed, they are all too willing to be co-opted by the military for the sake of access and ratings. And there will be many Americans who won't know what's happening. They'll be too busy watching the latest entertainment spectacle and trying to guess the next American Idol.

Thankfully, we have not yet reached the point of no hope. But it must be acknowledged that the average American simply does not have the ability to withstand a totalitarian government.

Right now, all we can do is sound the alarm. Become educated. Form local citizens groups in your community. Educate your neighbors on their rights and inform them about the grave possibilities we face in the event of a government-declared emergency. Keep in almost near-constant contact with your representatives in Congress and voice your discontent. Most of all, stay informed and exercise your right to redress your grievances with the government while you still can.

As abolitionist Wendell Phillips once proclaimed:

Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty--power is ever stealing from the many to the few.... The hand entrusted with power becomes ... the necessary enemy of the people. Only by continual oversight can the democrat in office be prevented from hardening into a despot.

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