

Foundations are in place for martial law in the US

by Ritt Goldstein

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Recent pronouncements from the Bush Administration and national security initiatives put in place in the Reagan era could see internment camps and martial law in the United States.

When president Ronald Reagan was considering invading Nicaragua he issued a series of executive orders that provided the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) with broad powers in the event of a "crisis" such as "violent and widespread internal dissent or national opposition against a US military invasion abroad". They were never used.

But with the looming possibility of a US invasion of Iraq, recent pronouncements by President George Bush's domestic security chief, Tom Ridge, and an official with the US Civil Rights Commission should fire concerns that these powers could be employed or a *de facto drift* into their deployment could occur.

On July 20 the *Detroit Free Press* ran a story entitled "Arabs in US could be held, official warns". The story referred to a member of the US Civil Rights Commission who foresaw the possibility of internment camps for Arab Americans. FEMA has practised for such an occasion.

FEMA, whose main role is disaster response, is also responsible for handling US domestic unrest.

From 1982-84 Colonel Oliver North assisted FEMA in drafting its civil defence preparations. Details of these plans emerged during the 1987 Iran-Contra scandal.

They included executive orders providing for suspension of the constitution, the imposition of martial law, internment camps, and the turning over of government to the president and FEMA.

A *Miami Herald* article on July 5, 1987, reported that the former FEMA director Louis Guiffrida's deputy, John Brinkerhoff, handled the martial law portion of the planning. The plan was said to be similar to one Mr Guiffrida had developed earlier to combat "a national uprising by black militants". It provided for the detention "of at least 21 million American Negroes" in "assembly centres or relocation camps".

Today Mr Brinkerhoff is with the highly influential Anser Institute for Homeland Security.

Following a request by the Pentagon in January that the US military be allowed the option of deploying troops on American streets, the institute in February published a paper by Mr Brinkerhoff arguing the legality of this.

He alleged that the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, which has long been accepted as prohibiting such deployments, had simply been misunderstood and misapplied.

The preface to the article also provided the revelation that the national plan he had worked on, under Mr Giuffrida, was "approved by Reagan, and actions were taken to implement it".

By April, the US military had created a Northern Command to aid Homeland defence. Reuters reported that the command is "mainly expected to play a supporting role to local authorities".

However, Mr Ridge, the Director of Homeland Security, has just advocated a review of US law regarding the use of the military for law enforcement duties.

Disturbingly, the full facts and final contents of Mr Reagan's national plan remain uncertain. This is in part because President Bush took the unusual step of sealing the Reagan presidential papers last November. However, many of the key figures of the Reagan era are part of the present administration, including John Poindexter, to whom Oliver North later reported.

At the time of the Reagan initiatives, the then attorney-general, William French Smith, wrote to the national security adviser, Robert McFarlane: "I believe that the role assigned to the Federal Emergency Management Agency in the revised Executive Order exceeds its proper function as a co-ordinating agency for emergency preparedness ... this department and others have repeatedly raised serious policy and legal objections to an 'emergency czar' role for FEMA."

Criticism of the Bush Administration's response to September 11 echoes Mr Smith's warning. On June 7 the former presidential counsel John Dean spoke of America's sliding into a "constitutional dictatorship" and martial law.

Ritt Goldstein is an investigative journalist and a former leader in the movement for US law enforcement accountability. He revealed exclusively in the Herald last week the Bush Administration's plans for a domestic spying system more pervasive than the Stasi network in East Germany.

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