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The Besieged Capital: Militarisation of Washington DC

By Adam Garfinkle

SYNOPSIS

The pre-Inaugural militarisation of Washington, DC is necessary under the circumstances, but may outlive its usefulness in due course. The optic, meanwhile, is disheartening.

COMMENTARY

IF VISITORS were to find themselves in Washington, DC right now and took the opportunity to cycle around the Capitol, they would see the entire National Mall area fenced off and under armed guard.

That includes all the museums, including the Natural History Museum, the Air & Space Museum, the Native American Museum, the National Museum of African-American History and Culture, and the rest. It includes the Library of Congress, the Supreme Court, the Capitol of course, the House and Senate Office Buildings, and more.

The Capitol: Barb-Wired

Ten-foot high no-climb, no-tip fences with razor wire, and jersey barriers, are everywhere. Each cross street along Independence Avenue facing toward the Mall and the White House is blocked by police with the aid of either a massive dump truck or a giant Metro bus.

No one on foot can enter any building in this area, not even the lobby, without a police or National Guard badge, or some specialty badge such as an Architect of the Capitol badge for those who work, for example, at the Botanical Gardens building.

Tanks and armoured personnel carriers are plentiful. The DC National Guard, unique

among US National Guard units in that it is always federalised, has flooded in. Guardsmen stand in full riot gear, armed with an array of automatic rifles. Nearest the Capitol they are deployed in groups of two or three about every ten metres.

FBI personnel are everywhere, bomb-sniffing dogs in tow. There are DC police, Capitol Police, Park Police, and Secret Service units all over the place. More uniformed and armed military and police personnel are deployed right now in Washington, DC -- more than 20,000 -- than in all the anti-terror deployments involving the US Armed Forces around the world.

Like Living in a Baghdad Green Zone

My youngest son lives less than a kilometre from the epicentre of the security node. A senator has an apartment in the same building, as do several other elected and other officials. Private and DC police security and surveillance of that and many dozens of similar buildings are intense.

Police stopped my son's car as he made his way to work a few days ago; the officers were deeply curious about what he was doing with a bolt cutter. (He does hardscaping and landscaping work; bolt-cutters come in handy for that sort of thing. Luckily, he did not bring along his chainsaw.)

This is what my hometown looks like in these days before the Inauguration of Joe Biden as the 46th president of the United States on 20 January 2021. Except for the weather, a mild winter, it actually looks and feels a little like the Green Zone in Baghdad. No one here has ever witnessed anything like it. No Inauguration, not even the Pope's visit in 2015, has seen security like this.

What cannot be seen with the naked eye is the fact the United States approaches the Inauguration with an "acting" Secretary of Defence, an "acting-acting" Secretary of Homeland Security in an insurrectional moment, and a soon to be "acting" Secretary of Health and Human Services at a time of maximum pandemic peril. It is not a happy moment for rank-and-file US national security professionals.

Overwhelming Force as Deterrent

So I am glad for the extraordinary security precautions in the city. As my former boss, Colin L. Powell, likes to say, overwhelming force not only works better as a deterrent than marginally superior force, it can also work as a way to minimise and quickly smother violence if it breaks out anyway.

That is what US authorities are doing in Washington right now, and there are signs that some of the groups involved in threatening violence are indeed in the process of being deterred before this major display of *force majeure*. Social media is replete with warning messages from the seditious far right that the "deep state" is setting a trap.

But of course there is no "deep state" as imagined in the addled minds of conspiracy-theory mongers -- even if, perchance, some of those warning messages have originated in certain US government agencies. The authorities, and the rest of the

sane people in the DC area with them, are fearing the worst, hoping for the best, and expecting something in between.

Downsides to Capital's Militarisation

The downsides to the militarisation of the capital city, however, are several. The optic it broadcasts to the nation and to rest of the world, like the optic of much of what has happened since the 3 November election, is very disheartening.

One has to wonder if it makes any sense right now for the incoming Biden administration to pursue its plan for a Summit of Democracies anytime soon. Hookers are not persuasive preaching chastity, and the US government cannot be persuasive right now lecturing on democratic probity.

Then there is the problem of nails without heads: easy to drive in, difficult to pull out. On 24 March 1986, the Reagan administration ordered attacks on Libyan military assets near the Gulf of Sidra following alleged accumulated evidence of Libyan government involvement in terror attacks in Europe and elsewhere.

The attacks were accompanied by a hardening of potential high-symbolic terrorist targets in Washington, including along Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House, and extending down the block towards New York Avenue in front of the Treasury Department. That cordoned-off area eventually became a pedestrian zone, flanked by large concrete barriers. The threat long ago had subsided, but the “temporary” measures taken in 1986 remain.

6 January: Guerilla Attack More than Terrorism

Similarly, transport security procedures enacted after 11 September 2001, like having little old ladies and arthritic old men remove their shoes to go through airport security, remain in force two decades later, even though they are arguably counter-productive.

Some say “you can't be too careful”, but actually, yes, you can: You can do terrorism's work for it by being complicit in the undermining of your own social morale, principles and way of life.

That said, referring to the groups and individuals involved in the 6 January insurrection at the Capitol as domestic terrorists is, in my view, a bit overwrought. If we stick to the proper definition, terrorism must involve deliberate acts of deadly force designed to shock authorities into reacting counterproductively to them.

What happened on 6 January, and may happen again soon, is better described as guerilla theatre spectacle along the lines of the reality-TV mentality, which makes perfect sense considering that Donald Trump, as principal instigator, has been a reality-TV president all along.

Killing people was not the aim of the 6 January insurrectionists, but that was then and what is coming may indeed involve deliberate use of deadly force.

So no one knows how long what is now described as temporary may need to endure.

It is therefore understandable to worry that the security expedients now erected in Washington may outlive their utility but remain in place anyway. Nothing is more permanent than a temporary government programme, after all.

Necessary and prudent as it may be for the moment, it is heartbreaking to see Washington in its present straits. It would be soul-shattering for me and many others -- Americans and non-US nationals alike -- if the heartbreak were to become routinised.

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