

# White House plan for FBI Internet spying

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A vast new computer monitoring system, controlled by the FBI, would be established under a plan being discussed with the Clinton administration, it was reported last week. According to a draft document obtained by a civil liberties group opposed to the plan, and leaked to the *New York Times*, the FBI would be given sweeping new powers to spy on all computer-related activities by federal government employees.

The pretext for this vast expansion of federal police powers is the bogeyman regularly invoked by the US government in recent years to justify military aggression and attacks on democratic rights—the threat of “international terrorism.” National Security Council officials claim that a number of foreign countries and organizations are developing methods of “cyberattack” on key US government and commercial computer systems. The Clinton administration has requested \$1.45 billion for defense against such computer attacks, in its Year 2000 budget request, up from \$950 million approved for fiscal 1999.

The plan calls for the establishment of a Federal Intrusion Detection Network, or FIDNET, to become operational by the year 2003. FIDNET would be comprised of thousands of software programs which would continuously monitor computer systems connected to the Internet looking for “patterns” which might indicate cyberattack.

A National Infrastructure Protection Center would be established at the FBI to monitor data flowing to and from government computer systems, including the Pentagon and intelligence agencies. The monitoring would include comprehensive scanning of all data downloads from federal agencies and of all e-mail to and from the computers of federal government employees.

Since an enormous volume of business is conducted with government computers, ranging from the electronic filing of tax returns to the downloading of

the texts of bills before Congress, virtually every computer user in the United States, and many internationally, could become the subject of electronic surveillance coordinated by the FBI.

The plan would also provide for government monitoring of private non-government computer activities which could affect the security of banking, telecommunications, transportation and other vital industries. This spy power would be lodged in the General Services Administration, the principal federal housekeeping agency, and data collected would supposedly be stored separately from the files maintained by the FBI and other federal police agencies—a separation proposed in order to defuse the expected public opposition to government spying on the Internet.

According to the text of the draft document leaked to the *Times*, “the collection of certain data identified as anomalous activity or a suspicious event would not be considered a privacy issue.” NSC officials maintain that federal government employees have no right of privacy for communications from the workplace. Just as private employers routinely spy on the personal phone calls of workers, the federal government is entitled to spy on the e-mail communications of its workers.

The exposure of this draft plan aroused opposition not only among civil liberties groups, but within the computer and electronic commerce industries, which fear that such government monitoring will interfere with business activities. One result of their pressure is that House Majority Leader Richard Armey, an arch right-winger normally found in the law-and-order camp, issued a statement denouncing the Clinton administration plan as an Orwellian intrusion.

On July 29, the day after the *Times* leaked the document, the House Appropriations Committee deleted all funding for FIDNET program from the

spending bill for the Commerce, Justice and State Departments. But a spokeswoman for the House Republican leadership denied that the action was in response to the concerns of civil liberties groups. She said the committee could not fund any new initiatives because of the caps on new spending provided by the 1997 budget agreement.

Clinton administration officials said that a review of the draft plan would be completed and submitted to the president for a final decision in September, at which point the White House would seek to have the funding reinserted into the appropriations bill.

Whatever the immediate fate of the FIDNET appropriation, the sweeping scale of the proposed Internet spying, and the lack of any widespread public outcry over the threat to democratic rights, are a warning of things to come. As the Internet becomes more and more a vehicle for political discussion and debate beyond the bounds of what is permitted in the corporate-controlled mass media, it becomes increasingly intolerable to the capitalist state.



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