

US panel calls for stepped-up repression and police spying

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12 June 2000

A report issued by the National Commission on Terrorism was released last week, outlining the panel's proposals for strengthening the repressive powers of the US government in the name of fighting "terrorism." The report uses this pretext—unrelated to any actual increase in terrorist activities—to justify measures that would curtail basic civil liberties and increase the power of US intelligence agencies and the military.

The Commission was established after the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Its official purpose was to develop strategies to counter the alleged growing terrorist threat to the US. It is composed of six Republicans and four Democrats who were appointed by the House of Representatives and Senate.

In general, the report states that the United States should be more aggressive in tracking down and prosecuting those labeled as suspected or potential "terrorists." One of its most controversial proposals is that the activity of foreign students visiting the US be tracked more closely. "A small minority may exploit their student status to support terrorist activity," the report argues, and therefore intelligence agencies should follow the identity and activity of all foreign-national students.

This plan is not only overtly racist, but it ignores the reality that the bulk of terrorist attacks in America, and certainly the bloodiest, have been perpetrated not by foreign students or immigrants, but by homegrown American fascists like Timothy McVeigh. But there is no suggestion that the CIA monitor the activity of all American students, because a "small minority may exploit their student status to support terrorist activity," or that similar measures should be applied to discharged veterans of the US military (like McVeigh and Terry Nichols) or other social groups from which a

terrorist might possibly emerge.

It is worth recalling that the immediate response of the US government and media to the Oklahoma City bombing was that foreign terrorists must have carried it out, before it came to light that the atrocity was, in fact, the activity of fanatic right-wing Americans. In any case, the latest proposal continues the demonization of foreigners and immigrants. It represents an attack on the civil liberties of foreign students, who are all smeared by the report, based on their ethnicity and nationality, as potential supporters of terrorism.

The report also suggests that the military assume control of the response to any major terrorist attack. Currently, such control would be allocated to civilian agencies such as the FBI and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). It is argued that the military is more organized, with better communications systems, and would therefore be more capable of handling a major crisis on US soil.

This suggestion—part of a general growth in the importance of the military for the US government—is quite extraordinary, given the traditional exclusion of the military from domestic affairs. The Commission's chairman L. Paul Bremer asserts that the report is "not recommending martial law." Nevertheless the motives behind the proposal are clear. It could be used, in the event of any threat deemed "terrorist" in nature, to justify the deployment of the army in restoring order. As an editorial in *USA Today* points out, the military is used in domestic affairs only by those "who like the swiftness with which soldiers imprison and repress civilians."

Another proposal would weaken restrictions on the information-gathering practices of the CIA with regard to the pursuit of suspected terrorists. "The CIA has created a climate that is overly risk averse," when it

comes to employing so-called unsavory individuals. Prohibitions on the use of unsavory persons are meant to prevent the agency from following mistaken leads and to prevent the prosecution of innocent individuals based on the testimony of unreliable sources. Bill Harlow, a spokesman for the CIA, was quick to point out that these restrictions did not hinder the agency's activity. "There has never been a case," he said, "when higher-ups were asked to authorize utilizing unsavory people that they didn't say, 'Go ahead.'"

Other proposals include:

* declaring Greece and Pakistan to be countries "not fully cooperating" with US anti-terrorist plans. Bremer states that over the past 25 years there have been 146 attacks against American targets in Greece, only one of which was solved. Both the Greek and the Pakistani governments reacted strongly against the proposal. "The report's content," said Greek Government spokesman Dimitris Reppas, "bears no relation to reality."

* declaring Afghanistan a "state sponsor of terrorism";

* stopping the process of US reconciliation with Iran, on the grounds of Iran's supposed support of terrorism;

* passing stricter laws on the manufacture and transport of materials that could be used in biological weapons.

The justification for all of these suggested measures is the supposed increased threat of terrorist attacks to the US. This rationale is extremely dubious, given that of the 393 acts worldwide deemed to be "terrorist" in nature last year, only two occurred in North America.

Certainly the foreign policy of the US government has provoked anti-American sentiment among some groups, however this alleged "terrorist threat" is being used to justify the strengthening of the American state, the infringement of basic liberties, and the removal of restrictions to domestic intelligence activity. As with the justification for the construction of a missile defense system, the official rationale—whether it is the threat from "rogue states" or that from terrorists—serves as a pretext for ulterior strategic aims of the US government. The measures proposed by the National Committee on Terrorism, if carried out, will be used to attack all opposition to the policies of the US state.

The proposals are merely a part of a wider strengthening of US military and intelligence agencies.

A recent report reveals that in 1999 permission was given to the FBI and the National Security Agency to carry out a total of 880 wiretaps, a dramatic increase over previous years. In 1993, the year before Clinton took office, the number was 484, and in 1990 it was 324.

These activities have come under attack by civil liberties organizations, in part because the government is not required to divulge the rational behind the decision to seek a tap. "We're concerned," said James Zogby of the Arab-American Institute, "over the disregard we see for civil liberties in this administration." The secret federal court that was established in 1978 to regulate the tapping has provided only a rubber stamp for federal spying, approving 13,600 taps and disapproving only one.



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