

Chilling episode in Bush's war on democratic rights

Green Party activist recounts military detention at Maine airport

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On November 1 Green Party USA activist Nancy Oden was prevented from boarding a plane to Chicago at the Bangor (Maine) International Airport and temporarily detained on orders of military personnel stationed at the airport. Officials claimed that Oden, 60, a vocal opponent of the war in Afghanistan, had refused to cooperate with security procedures, a claim belied by the facts of the case.

The WSWS reported this sinister episode [Green Party opponent of Afghan war detained at US airport] and contacted a representative of the Green Party USA for an interview with Ms. Oden. In reply, we received the following account. We post this chilling account of what took place in Bangor for the information of our readers.

Bangor Airport Incident, November 1, 2001

Nancy Oden, Jonesboro, Maine

On Thursday, November 1, 2001, I left my farmhouse on the North Coast of Maine, where I'm an organic grower, and headed for the Bangor International Airport in Bangor, Maine. I was dressed conservatively in a long, brown skirt with a matching jacket and turtleneck sweater, no jewelry, no buttons or other political indications attached, looking very much like other women my age in this part of the world.

I am a relatively well-known environmental, social and political activist who has run for public office. It should be noted that, while I've been an activist for over thirty years, I've never been arrested, nor has there been anything in my life that would signal I meant harm to anyone.

Also, this was the third time this year I had traveled out of (or attempted to, in this case) Bangor Airport on American Airlines using an e-ticket purchased from Priceline.com bought weeks before with my own credit card. They had no reason for profiling and singling me out. It had to have been because of my political views which, of course, is not a good reason (see US Constitution's first Ten Amendments, otherwise known as the Bill of Rights).

I was headed to Chicago for a Green Party USA National Coordinating Committee meeting, where I was to speak the next night on biochemical warfare and pesticides as weapons of war. I was also scheduled to interview job applicants, present several proposals and financial reports, and so on. I am a lead person on the National Coordinating Committee of the Green Party USA (the original Green Party, although there is now another which took a very similar name).

I arrived at the Bangor Airport the now-requisite two hours ahead of the flight and walked in to the airport to the sight of a couple of dozen National Guard troops carrying machine guns in their hands wandering around the lobby. I walked down to the American Airlines ticket counter, where there were no other passengers, and told the airlines ticket agent my name. I was holding out my picture ID and the printed itinerary they told us to bring, but he barely glanced at them. I remember thinking, "Does he have a picture of me under that counter? Why didn't he look at my ID?"

No one checked my ID at any time. They all knew what I looked like and, it became clear, my antiwar stance. I am not that well known that they would have known me on sight. Why were they briefed about me before I arrived at the airport? What were they told? Was it the FBI or some other agency? Which one?

The ticket agent spent an inordinate amount of time on his computer, then finally produced a boarding pass with a large "S" written on it. I asked him what that meant, and he said I had been picked to have my bags searched. Well, one expects that now, so I said, "Oh, that's okay." But I had a feeling there was more.

Since there was no one else around, I turned back to him and looked him in the eye—he seemed a decent guy—and asked him, "My being picked wasn't random, was it?" He hesitated a moment, but then said, "No, your name was already flagged in the computer and you would have been searched in any case." Well, still possibly coincidence.

Then to the x-ray for my bags and me. I said to the two women sitting by the machine that scans the bags, sort of apologetically, "I've been picked to have my bags searched. I know this might sound silly, but since you handle all these people's bags and belongings—with the Anthrax scare and all—I'd like it if whoever searches through my clothes and things wash their hands first." They looked at me with hate and loathing and one said, "We don't want YOUR germs, either." (Turns out they wear rubber gloves.)

"Whoa," I thought, "either I'm back in kindergarten or these normally quite civil women have some reason for being hostile." I had the distinct feeling they had been told awful things about me—I want to know what they were told about this profiled individual coming to their airport.

Neither my bags nor I set off any beeps in the machinery so we walked right through to the boarding area. Here I sat down with the other passengers. There was one National Guard soldier in the boarding area; he was a short man with a black eye wearing camo gear and carrying a machine gun.

Soon after I sat down, the National Guardsman looked at the dozen or so passengers, his eyes stopping at me, and he yelled, "Bring those bags over here!" Since he didn't call my name, how did he know which person was me, since I did not look appreciably different from the others?

When I didn't move fast enough, he yelled again, "Hurry up! Move! Bring those bags up here!" This did not make me move faster. By now people were beginning to stare at me as if I might possibly be someone bent on doing something wrong.

I set my two smallish bags on the table where two women were waiting to search my bags. As one of them had trouble with a zipper on my older bag, I said, "Oh, that zipper is not right, here, let me open it for you," and I reached over the table to undo the zipper. Immediately, the soldier yelled out, "Get your hands away from there!" By now the other passengers

were getting nervous, of course.

He was standing at the end of the table with the women on one side looking in my bags and me standing on the other side of the table. I turned to face him, which put my back towards everyone else, and he grabbed my left arm and began loudly spouting pro-war nonsense into my face. "Don't you understand we have to get them before they get us? Don't you understand what happened September 11?" and so on.

I immediately pulled my arm away from him and said, "Do not touch me. You cannot do that," and stepped back a foot or so, saying that I didn't want to hear his views on why he thought we should kill starving, helpless people in Afghanistan.

He grabbed for me again. I stepped back further stating emphatically, "Do Not Touch Me," and further emphasizing that I did not want to listen to his views on the war. He was about to leave his position and come after me again, but I saw the senior security man who is usually there shake his head "No" at the soldier, who then backed off, but he was angry that I would not submit to his holding me while he forced his views on me.

I turned and there just a couple of inches away was the man with the metal-detecting wand. I stepped back a foot or two so he wasn't right up against me, and he did the wand thing. I was the only one whose bags were searched. For a woman of a certain age such as myself to stand there with arms outstretched while a man skimmed my body with a device was very embarrassing and demeaning.

I asked him not to touch me with the wand, as I didn't know what it was, but, of course, he had to touch my shoulder with it. I ignored this, just wanting to get out of there. While he was doing the wand thing, I heard the soldier, who was behind me, say, "Don't let her on the plane." I thought he was talking to himself.

Then they were done with the searching, and I walked the three feet to the boarding gate. The American Airlines agent said, "You can't get on the plane." I asked why. He replied, "Because he [indicating the soldier] says you didn't cooperate with the search." I said, "But you were standing here the whole time. Didn't you see him grab my arm and talk loudly into my face?" He said he couldn't see that because my back was to people, only saw me back off.

I then told the American Airlines agent that I needed to get to Chicago and stated what I had to do there. The American Airlines agent then said, rather softly, probably so the guardsman soldier couldn't hear, "We'll put you on the four o'clock plane; that's the last one out today that you can go through Boston and still get to Chicago tonight." I replied, "Fine, let's just do this. I don't care if I'm late so long as I get there."

Unfortunately, the Guardsman overheard, and he wasn't done with me. Clearly, this non-subservient female had to be punished for not being sufficiently obsequious. He saw me picking up my bags to go out into the lobby and wait for the 4 o'clock plane, and yelled (that seemed to be his only means of communication), "Come With Me!" I asked, "Why? Where are we going?" He replied, louder, "Come With Me!"

A few people to whom I've told this insist the government/military is trying to "criminalize" me and other political activists who don't have criminal records. This is what's done to people of color. When they're harassed and/or beaten by police, they eventually, of course, do something to protect themselves and then get arrested for hitting an officer or whatever. If they then get convicted of a felony, they'll go to prison and probably a few years of parole when one's rights are mostly nonexistent, and draconian restrictions are put upon one's activities. Convicted felons lose a lot of rights in this country: their travel is henceforth limited, in some states they can't vote, own a gun, and various other limitations.

Under the circumstances, and because I had a few hours until four o'clock anyway, it seemed best to go with the guardsman. The circumstances being that each individual soldier/national guardsman seems to be The Law unto themselves. Each of them makes it up as they go along, punishing people who don't hop to. Military law is not

democracy.

He took me to the entrance area, apart from anyone else. Then he ordered, loudly, "Sit Down!" I gave him a look and then sat. The soldier found the airport policeman and told him to stay with me. Upon reflection, I probably wasn't free to leave, but I thought I was waiting for the next plane so I just stayed there.

The Airport policeman was a pleasant local man and we talked about what had just happened as well as people we knew, etc. Within minutes I looked up to see 5-6 National Guardsmen in their camo gear all carrying machine guns marching in a sort of formation towards me. I was sitting down quietly talking with the policeman. The situation looked like a bad movie.

It occurred to me that this is how people get "disappeared," which has happened to over 1,200 Americans so far since September 11. We used to hear about this only in repressive military regimes in other places (usually bolstered by our tax dollars). I'm sure they were ready to arrest me for allegedly "not cooperating with a security search," with which I had, indeed, cooperated.

All of a sudden the ludicrousness of the situation struck me. There I am, sitting down with my bags, a woman clearly not a physical threat, and this phalanx of soldiers in formation descends upon me ready to arrest me for something I did not do. I gave a little laugh and said to the lead man, "What, all this, just for me?" Then, I asked, "What's this really about? What's going on here?"

He replied, "We understand you didn't cooperate with a security search." I said, "That's ridiculous. They searched my bags and they did the wand search. The only problem was your man here [I indicated the short guy with the black eye] grabbing my arm and spouting pro-war views loudly in my face." The lead soldier (I don't know his rank) said, astonishingly, "He told me he only hit your arm."

I looked at the lead soldier wide-eyed with a few unbidden (certainly unwanted when I'm trying to look fierce) tears in my eyes, and asked, "Even if that's all he had done, would that be okay?" I think he then realized the guardsman had been way out of line and said, "Wait here." They left, and the policeman stayed with me. I don't really think I was free to go, although I had not been arrested.

I found out later they had gone upstairs and told the Bangor Airport manager to tell all airlines in the Airport not to allow me to fly out of Bangor that day, and possibly more than just that one day. Since the military are in charge of our airports and they can override civilians in charge, this was made to happen.

I was to be punished for the crime of questioning their authority, especially for the guardsman to hold my arm and force me to listen to his brainwashed rantings.

Every airline in the Bangor Airport was given my name and told that I did not cooperate with a security search. Not cooperating with a security search at an airport is a federal crime. If, indeed, I had not cooperated, they would have arrested me right then and there. But I had been searched so they couldn't say that.

However, now I have to wonder if every airline in the world doesn't have me in their computer as a person who didn't cooperate with the security search, which means they can deny me passage in their airplanes. We will find out as time goes on.

They told the policeman this news and had him tell me that I wouldn't be allowed to fly out of Bangor that day. So I said I had to go American Airlines and get my money back. The policeman came with me.

The same AA clerk was at the counter. He stepped outside the counter to converse with the policeman and me. He confirmed that they had been told not to allow me to fly out of Bangor that day. I asked him about the next day and he said he didn't know. This is not a small matter for me since the Bangor Airport is 100 miles from where I live.

The AA clerk then suggested I drive to Boston (5½-hour drive) and fly

out of there. There were several problems with that, I told him. First, my old car barely made it the 100 miles to the Bangor Airport and might not make it to Boston or back again. Then there were the parking fees in Boston as well as the fact that I might not be allowed to fly out of there or might not be able to get a seat once I got there. Also, if they would not honor my now-expired ticket, I'd have to pay full fare, which I couldn't afford. Not a serious option.

I then asked the American Airlines clerk for my money back so I might consider some alternative means of transport. He said he couldn't refund my money. I asked him why and he said, "It's a non-refundable ticket." This was so ridiculous that all three of us laughed a little. All the airlines issue tickets on other tickets all the time. So I asked him again and he said he couldn't refund the ticket, indicating it wasn't his decision, which I understood, and told him I'd take it up with the airline later.

Then the policeman, half apologetically, told me I'd been banned from the Airport for that day, and that he had to escort me out. I told him I understood that he was under the military's rule, and that I would call it his walking me to the door, rather than escorting me out of the Airport. We walked to the exit. I thanked him for being kind and considerate, which he had been, and left with the sinking feeling that something bad is happening to our country. And this is how it begins.



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