

Operation TIPS: Bush plan to recruit 1 million domestic spies

Kate Randall
22 July 2002

Your new cable television service was just hooked up. The local utility worker came by to read your meter. A package was delivered to your doorstep. Under a new program proposed by the Bush administration, the workers who visit your home to provide such services may have been recruited by the government to spy on you. They may have already made a toll-free call to a national hotline to report “suspicious activity.”

Operation TIPS—the Terrorism Information and Prevention System—is one of the latest initiatives of the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism.” According to a statement posted as recently as last week on the government’s web site, TIPS “will be a nationwide program giving millions of American truckers, letters carriers, train conductors, ship captains, utility employees, and others a formal way to report suspicious terrorist activity.”

The program is one component of the administration’s USA Freedom Corps and Citizens Corps, announced by Bush in his State of the Union address last January, when he called for each American to donate two years, or 4,000 hours, in his or her lifetime to “the service of your neighbors and your nation.” In the case of Operation TIPS, workers are being called upon to serve their neighbors by spying on them for the US Justice Department. Rachel King, legislative counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union, described it as “a program that will turn local cable or gas or electrical technicians into government-sanctioned Peeping Toms.”

So clearly does the proposal smack of police-state measures reminiscent of Nazi Germany or Stalin’s GPU that a draft proposal last week from the House Select Committee on Homeland Security sought to block it, stating: “To ensure that no operation of the [Homeland Security] Department can be construed to promote citizens spying on one another, this draft will contain language to prohibit programs such as ‘Operation

TIPS.’”

Following discussions with Homeland Security officials, the United States Postal Service announced that it would opt out of Operation TIPS, at least for now, eliminating letter carriers from the potential pool of spies.

The scope of this new domestic spying program as envisaged by the Bush administration would be truly breathtaking. In its pilot stage, the plan calls for recruiting 1 million workers in ten as yet unnamed cities. The Citizens Corps web site has already begun accepting queries on the program and asks those interested to check back frequently for updates. Recruits are sought “whose routines make them well-positioned to recognize unusual events, to report suspicious activity.” They are to receive special training.

The government does not spell out what would qualify as “suspicious terrorist activity.” But it is obvious that US citizens would be spied on in their homes, their schools, their places of business, at public venues, on public transport or traveling in their private vehicles.

The Fourth Amendment to the US Constitution, part of the Bill of Rights, reads: “The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.”

Operation TIPS stands in direct violation of this Amendment. No warrant would be required for volunteer agents to spy on citizens in their homes. TIPS spies could be expected to take note of “subversive” titles on residents’ bookshelves. Some—such as cable or Internet service installers—would have access to home computers and could potentially scout out “suspicious” Internet browsing practices.

People of Arab descent or Muslim belief could be

singled out. Any hint of anti-government sentiment—specifically, opposition to Bush’s “war on terror”—found in people’s homes could be grounds for a TIPS agent to make a call to the hotline.

The plan calls for information gathered by these domestic spies to be entered into a government database, to be available not only to the Justice Department, but to a broad array of police agencies. Furthermore, because this information would be gathered surreptitiously, the targeted individuals would have no knowledge of the existence of intelligence files gathered on them, nor their contents.

While in its initial stages the Bush administration’s anti-democratic measures in the wake of September 11 were aimed against immigrants of Middle-Eastern and Central Asian descent, it was only a matter of time, as the *World Socialist Web Site* warned, for these methods to be used more widely. This program is one of the new elements in the government’s expansion of spying targeted against citizens and non-citizens alike.

In testimony July 11 before the House Select Committee on Homeland Security, Attorney General John Ashcroft made it clear that the government aims to break down barriers that hinder surveillance of citizens. He stated: “In the late 1970s, reforms were enacted in our judicial system reflecting a cultural myth that we could draw an artificial line at the border to differentiate between the threats we faced. In accordance with this myth, officials charged with detecting and deterring those seeking to harm Americans were divided into separate and isolated camps.... FBI agents were forced to blind themselves to information readily available to the general public, including those who seek to harm us.”

The “reforms” the attorney general is referring to are restrictions imposed in 1976 in the aftermath of the Watergate crisis, when a vast domestic spying operation by J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI, the CIA, army intelligence and other government agencies was exposed. A series of “Attorney General Guidelines” was established which stated that political dissent or unpopular ideas could not serve as the basis for an investigation, and which limited the scope of “acceptable” surveillance and infiltration of political and religious groups. This is the “cultural myth” Ashcroft and the Bush administration now seek to junk.

There are other indications that the Bush administration seeks to broaden its “anti-terror” dragnet. A July 12 Associated Press (AP) story reports the following: “While law enforcement looks broadly for terrorists, some FBI agents are working closely with Treasury agents to

conduct a more specialized search for US residents who might be working in an advisory capacity. As part of the effort, federal investigators are conducting extensive checks into the backgrounds of longtime citizens who fall under suspicion.” AP quotes an anonymous law enforcement official who says agents “are looking for people who have an affinity toward or sympathy for those carrying out terrorist attacks and provide any kind of support.”

The proposal for Operation TIPS has provoked no objections from the leadership of unions whose members would be potential informants. The International Brotherhood of Teamsters has enthusiastically backed the plan as part of its support for Bush’s “war on terrorism.” On June 21, Teamsters President James P. Hoffa said he would ask union truck operators to take part in a “grass-roots homeland security effort” to look for “suspicious activity” on the road.

“We have 500,000 truck drivers on the road at any one time, and these people can be the eyes and ears of the homeland security office,” Hoffa said. The Teamsters organize 250,000 workers in United Parcel Service, the nation’s largest package carrier.

As with all of the other anti-democratic measures put into effect by the Bush administration following the September 11 terror attacks, there has been no public discussion or debate on Operation TIPS. The government has offered little information on the program, and it is unclear whether it must be approved by Congress or can be implemented by executive fiat.

Whatever the immediate fate of Operation TIPS, the plan serves as a chilling warning of the police-state methods being adopted by the political establishment.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wswp.org/contact