

Specter of a police state

FBI “anti-terror” task force targets Bush administration opponents

The Editorial Board
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The Federal Bureau of Investigation has embarked on a large-scale operation to intimidate and attack opponents of the Bush administration’s war policy. In advance of the Democratic National Convention held earlier this month in Boston and the upcoming Republican convention in New York City, the FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) has mobilized agents to spy on, interrogate and threaten antiwar protesters and disrupt their activities.

In violation of basic democratic and Constitutional rights, the JTTF has placed under surveillance, and in some cases interviewed, dozens of people in at least six states about their antiwar views and actions. The JTTF’s measures have included visits to the homes and workplaces of antiwar activists, as well as to their friends and family members. In none of these cases was there any evidence of criminal activity—either committed or planned—on the part of the targeted individuals.

In keeping with Bush administration policy in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the FBI claims the operation is warranted by the “war on terrorism,” and that this outweighs any abridgment of basic civil liberties, including the First Amendment right to free speech and association. The spying operation is, in fact, a revival of McCarthyite tactics, aimed at silencing opponents of government policy.

Local offices of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have reported that FBI agents throughout the US have been monitoring the daily activities of numerous political activists, whom the authorities believe are planning to protest at major political events, including the upcoming Republican National Convention.

The *New York Times* reported August 16 that three men in Missouri in their early 20s said they were followed by federal agents for several days in the period leading up to the Democratic convention. FBI agents visited the homes of the young men’s parents and questioned them about their sons’ political views and activities. The three had planned to drive to Boston with a St. Louis-based activist group to protest at the convention, but were prevented from doing so when they were subpoenaed to testify before a federal grand jury on July 29.

“A chilling effect on free speech”

Denise Lieberman, legal director of the ACLU of Eastern Missouri, commented: “These young men are quite terrified by the experience of being targeted by the Joint Terrorism Task Force because of their

protest activities. The FBI interrogations have had a chilling effect on free speech.”

Several weeks ago in Denver, Colorado, police agents visited the home of 21-year-old Sarah Bardwell, an intern with the American Friends Service Committee, a nonviolent Quaker group. Bardwell was approached at her home and interrogated by four FBI agents and two Denver police officers. The young woman told the ACLU that the police agents told her and her housemates that they were “doing some preventive measures and investigating.”

According to the ACLU, the questions the agents asked Sarah Bardwell were consistent with those asked of others interrogated by the JTTF: “Are you planning to be involved in any criminal acts at the national convention? Do you know anybody who is? Are you aware that if you assist or know anybody planning any criminal acts and do not report them, it’s a crime?”

An October 15, 2003, FBI Intelligence Bulletin acknowledged that the “FBI possesses no information indicating that violent or terrorist activities are being planned as part of these [antiwar] protests,” but claimed “the possibility exists that elements of the activist community may attempt to engage in violent, destructive, or disruptive acts,” thus justifying the operation.

In other words, Americans who have carried out no crime, and against whom there is no evidence of criminal intent, are being targeted for persecution and possible prosecution because of their constitutionally protected beliefs and activities. There is an ominous parallel between this policy of “preemptive” strikes against law-abiding citizens and residents and the official government policy of preemptive strikes against foreign countries, justified on the grounds of some future threat to “national security.”

The August 16 *Times* article reports that the newspaper has obtained a previously undisclosed five-page legal opinion by the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel which claims that the surveillance and interrogation of protesters do not violate the First Amendment right to free speech. The opinion states: “Given the limited nature of such public monitoring, any possible ‘chilling’ effect caused by the [FBI intelligence] bulletins would be quite minimal and substantially outweighed by the public interest in maintaining safety and order during large-scale demonstrations.”

Bush administration officials have repeatedly issued pro-forma denials that they would ever seek to curtail civil liberties, implying that any claims to the contrary are politically motivated slanders. In defense of the new measures targeting protesters, Joe Parris, an FBI spokesman in Washington, told the *New York Times*, “The FBI isn’t

in the business of chilling anyone's First Amendment rights."

Such hollow assurances have become the standard response to questions or protests about flagrant attacks on constitutionally protected rights. Government officials never attempt to explain how their actions conform to constitutional and legal prohibitions against government invasions of privacy and infringements on free speech and association. They simply issue empty disclaimers, with the implication that the public should simply trust them—and disregard the plain facts of their anti-democratic practices.

In his remarks to the *Times*, FBI spokesman Parris added, "But criminal behavior isn't covered by the First Amendment. What we're concerned about are injuries to convention participants, injuries to citizens, injuries to police and first responders."

With this statement, the FBI associates constitutionally protected free speech with criminality and violence, in order to justify harassment and intimidation of people against whom the agency admits having no evidence of any illegal activity.

The FBI witch-hunt is part and parcel of the Bush administration's ongoing "war on terror," in the name of which the administration has from the outset sought to whip up panic over external threats in order to justify police state measures. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks these attacks were aimed primarily at Arab and Muslim immigrants, with thousands rounded up, held without charges for months on end, and, in the case of many, ultimately deported on the basis of minor immigration infractions. This assault on basic rights is increasingly being directed against US citizens.

Bush and the Republicans, with the overwhelming support of the Democrats in Congress, seized on the events of September 11, 2001 to set into motion a sweeping assault on such longstanding civil liberties as the right to privacy, protection against unlawful search and seizure, presumption of innocence, and habeas corpus. Police agencies, including the FBI and CIA, have been given unprecedented power to share information through vast databases. These unconstitutional measures have been woven into the nation's legal framework by the USA Patriot Act and the formation of the Department of Homeland Security.

Domestic dissent—the real target

With the activities of the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force, the political establishment seeks to create a definite public mindset, in which external terrorism is conflated with domestic dissent. The basic premise is that anyone who opposes the foreign or domestic policies of the government is ipso facto guilty of aiding and abetting the terrorists.

Attorney General John Ashcroft spelled out the government's rationale for police state measures at a December 2001 appearance before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Defending the administration's authorization of secret military tribunals to try alleged terrorists, Ashcroft charged that any critics of such measures "give ammunition to America's enemies." He issued the following threat: "To those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty, my message is this: your tactics only aid terrorists, for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve." [See "Ashcroft defends Bush's war against the Constitution: Tells Senate hearing that critics 'aid terrorists'"]

World Socialist Web Site Editorial Board statement on November 7, 2001, warned: "While for the moment, the vast majority of those caught up by the government's dragnet are immigrants of Middle-Eastern and Central Asian descent, it is only a matter of time before these anti-democratic methods will be used more widely." [See "Bush's war at home: a creeping coup d'état"] This warning has been entirely vindicated.

It is becoming increasingly clear that these escalating police state measures are not designed to thwart a foreign terrorist threat, but are aimed at the growing opposition to government policy. Is it a mere coincidence that those alleged by the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force to be likely promoters of violence are inevitably opponents of the Bush administration's militarist policies? The government never explains why it is precisely those who oppose the government's policies from the left who represent witting or unwitting allies of terrorism.

It is worth recalling that the most bloody act of terrorism carried out on US soil prior to 9/11—the Oklahoma City bombing of April 1995—was perpetrated by fascistic elements associated with militia movements and other groups linked to prominent forces within the Republican Party.

These latest measures against antiwar protesters have received only perfunctory mention in the mainstream print and broadcast media. Where they have been reported, such as the August 16 *New York Times* article, the implications of their implementation for the American population have been downplayed.

The *Times* headline provided an implicit justification for the government operation, labeling those targeted by the FBI as "political troublemakers." An editorial in the paper the following day mildly criticized the "heavy-handed inquiries" as ineffective and a diversion from the "war against foreign enemies."

Consistent with their complicit role in the assault on democratic rights, the Democratic Party and its presidential candidate, John Kerry, have failed to issue any protest against the police-state actions of the FBI.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party warn that the FBI actions are indicative of the profound erosion of civil liberties in America in the aftermath of 9/11. The totality of measures enacted—the Patriot Act, the establishment of the Homeland Security Department, the arrest and indefinite detention, without any recourse to legal defense, of citizens and non-citizens alike as "enemy combatants—constitute the infrastructure of a police-military dictatorship.

This wholesale attack on democratic rights can be halted only through the organization and mobilization of working people, independent of the two big-business parties, in a struggle against the American financial oligarchy and its political agents.

We urge those who have been targeted by this FBI sweep—or any other anti-democratic government measures—to write to the WSWS so that we can inform our readership and provide the widest possible exposure of the assault on basic rights.



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