

California Sheriff admits spying on antiwar group

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Sheriff Richard Pierce of Fresno County, California, has finally admitted that one of his deputies infiltrated Peace Fresno, an antiwar organization featured in filmmaker Michael Moore's 2004 documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

The infiltrator was uncovered by accident. In 2003, Aaron Kilner, known as Aaron Stokes to the Peace Fresno activists, attended several meetings of the group, passed out its antiwar fliers and went to rallies. After he died in a motorcycle accident on August 30, a group member read an obituary identifying him as a deputy sheriff "assigned to the anti-terrorist team." The latter was the local Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF), one of several teams comprising state and local law enforcement personnel, FBI agents and other federal agents reportedly established after the September 11, 2001, terror attacks, purportedly to investigate and prevent terrorism.

After being stonewalled by the sheriff's department and the FBI, Peace Fresno and the American Civil Liberties Union demanded that California Attorney General Bill Lockyer investigate the matter under article V, section 13 of the California Constitution, a provision giving him "direct supervision over...every Sheriff."

After sitting on the case for almost two years, in a *Fresno Bee* article published February 10, the California Attorney General's Office announced what had been known from the outset, that there was "a strong case the Fresno County Sheriff's Department violated the civil rights of members of Peace Fresno by sending an undercover officer to their meetings."

In a February 10, 2006, report by the San Francisco Independent Media Center, it was revealed that Attorney General Lockyer had negotiated for several months with Sheriff Pierce over the release of

information about the infiltration of Peace Fresno. Camille Russell, president of the antiwar group at the time of the infiltration, said the organization was frustrated that the investigation was being suppressed. "We were anxious to know what possible justification they would use for infiltrating a completely nonviolent group whose members are engaged in no criminal activity."

In the end, after nearly two years of efforts to discover the truth behind the infiltration of Peace Fresno, including who ordered the surveillance and why the organization was targeted, the Attorney General's office has announced it may never issue a report on the incident. The stated reason, according to spokesperson Nathan Barankin, is concern that legal action could result from the case.

This feeble excuse suggests that the report likely contains evidence of a considerable number of other violations of civil rights and privacy laws—and not just against Peace Fresno.

Attorney General Lockyer is the "top law enforcement official in the state," declared Russell in a press conference on February 10. "If law enforcement agencies don't abide by his guidelines for protecting the privacy of people attending religious, social, political, and educational meetings, it is his job to discipline those agencies. I want to know how he plans to do that."

ACLU Police Practices Policy Director Mark Schlosberg has called for disclosure of the full results of the investigation. Citing the revelations of secret NSA monitoring of private phone calls and e-mails, along with Pentagon monitoring of peaceful antiwar activities on the campuses of the University of California at Berkeley and Santa Cruz, Schlosberg pointed to the case as "one more example of unlawful

government spying.”



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