

The outsourcing of political intimidation

Private firm revealed to be spying on antiwar groups in California

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12 July 2006

The *Los Angeles Times* recently revealed that a private corporation, SRA International, contracted by the California Office of Homeland Security (OHS), has compiled reports on demonstrations staged by political protest and antiwar groups in the state. The state monitoring of political opposition in California is representative of the broader assault on democratic rights taking place throughout the United States.

The *Times* wrote in articles published July 1 and 2 that it had obtained 2 of approximately 60 reports, which were prepared on a daily basis since March 2006. Political activities reviewed in the reports include an animal rights rally in San Francisco, a Women's International League for Peace and Freedom gathering at a courthouse in Santa Barbara in support of an antiwar protester facing federal trespassing charges, and an antiwar demonstration in Walnut Creek. The reports also contained summaries of news articles about the Iraq war, animal rights activists and terrorism.

The reports were shared among the California attorney general's office, the Highway Patrol and the OHS through the State Terrorism Threat Assessment Center, an organization the *Times* referred to as an "anti-terrorism partnership." The OHS is a state agency that works in coordination with the federal Department of Homeland Security.

News of the existence of the reports prepared by SRA International was only made public on July 1 through the *Times* article. According to the newspaper, California Attorney General Bill Lockyer's office already knew of the monitoring at least two months ago.

The immediate response of both the state attorney general's office and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's office was to distance the state government from any implications of wrongdoing.

Lockyer spokesman Tom Dresslar told the *Times*, "When people exercise their first Amendment right to rally, march and protest, they should not have to worry that intelligence officials are watching them or their activities are in any way being painted with the terrorism brush.... Collecting information on protests has no legitimate anti-terrorism intelligence function. None. No intelligence agency has any need to maintain this kind of information."

If the monitoring was of such concern to the attorney general, one might ask why it was that nothing was said to the public of the

reports until their existence was leaked to the *Times*.

The governor's communications director, Adam Mendelsohn, told the *Times* that Schwarzenegger had "no information and no knowledge that this was happening" and that "the governor feels that this particular information gathering is totally inappropriate and unacceptable."

According to the *Times*, OHS officials maintain that such information was included only in the two reports obtained by the newspaper. Last Thursday, Schwarzenegger's office released in a review to the media more than 80 intelligence reports prepared for the OHS in an effort to demonstrate the limited and aberrant nature of the program of state spying on protesters.

The severely circumscribed character of the review highlights that it by no means constituted an opening of the California OHS books. The *Times* reported on July 7, "Large sections of the reports shown to reporters had been removed," that the OHS said the censored information was "law-enforcement sensitive" and that "time for reviewing the documents was limited but the material visible to reporters contained no other information on political protests."

In other words, the California OHS was able to reveal to the media only what it deemed appropriate and concordant with its own interests. According to the *Times*, the first intelligence report prepared by SRA International included information on the anti-immigrant group, the Minuteman Project. Subsequent reports contained no material on the group. Chris Bertelli, spokesman for the OHS, said, "The determination ...was made that this probably doesn't have an impact on homeland security." Also revealed was a censored report, dated June 22, which included a reference to "suspicious conversations at a mosque, San Diego, Calif.," with no further elaboration. Bertelli claimed that the mosque conversations related to an ongoing investigation, according to the *Times*.

The media review was thus used as an opportunity to demonstrate the state's willingness to condone the activity of the right-wing Minuteman Project, while emphasizing the necessity of monitoring "suspicious conversations" among Muslims.

The *Times* reported July 1 that Matthew Bettenhausen, the governor's homeland security director, claimed that information on the protest groups was mistakenly included in reports made by SRA to the OHS. According to the director, an SRA report dated March 7 included summaries of 10 rallies set for later in the

month. Listed were the date of the event, the purpose, the location, the expected number of people, the source of the information, and “officer safety issues.” Bettenhausen says that the OHS told SRA not to include such information in the future in its reports. However, an April 10 report contained similar material. Again, the request was made to exclude such material from reports to the OHS, and since then no such material has been included, according to Bettenhausen.

The statement that SRA International provided this information against the wishes of the California OHS can certainly be questioned. The *Times* July 7 article states that Alan Benitez, an official in the attorney general’s office, wrote in a letter to one of his superiors that SRA International was acting at the direction of the California OHS.

Indeed, information available on its web site reveals that SRA International is not an amateurish organization prone to make such mistakes, but a company with a long and established relationship with the US government.

“We have provided technology and strategic consulting services and solutions to federal government clients for over 27 years and have longstanding relationships with many of them,” the web site states. “We have served clients within the Departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force; the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the Office of the Secretary of Defense; the Department of the Treasury; and the Federal Emergency Management Agency for over 20 years. We currently serve over 250 government clients on over 750 active engagements.”

SRA International has profited handsomely since September 11 and the so-called “war on terror” declared by the Bush administration. Its 2005 annual report lists total revenue of approximately \$875 million, which has soared since 2000, when the figure was \$300 million.

SRA International specializes in data and text mining. This process involves sifting through many textual forms, such as “e-mails, memos, company reports, and news wires,” in multiple languages, to produce “critical metadata, such as names of persons, organizations, places, and other important data.” This “mined” information is then utilized to provide links between “entities such as persons, organizations, places, artifacts, and other concepts of interest” and analyzed for “associated links within and across terrorist networks.”

According to SRA’s web site, the application of text mining for Homeland Security and Intelligence commonly includes: “Analysis of terrorist networks. Rapid identification of critical information about such topics as weapons of mass destruction from very large collections of text documents. Surveillance of the Web, e-mails, or chat rooms.”

The collection of data and compiling of reports for the California OHS on antiwar and political protest groups highlight the real motives behind the creation and maintenance of the Department of Homeland Security. Contrary to the near-constant hysteria whipped up by the mass media and official political figures about the danger of foreign “terrorists,” the greatest concern of the US ruling class is the actual and potential political radicalization of millions of US citizens disgusted with the war in Iraq, the multifaceted attack on democratic rights, and the severe levels of

social inequality in the US.

The same essential motivations lie behind the enormous National Security Agency database established to track the phone calls of hundreds of millions of Americans and the collection by the US Treasury Department of data on international financial transactions. In both cases, the Bush administration uses the “war on terrorism” to justify the implementation of programs that constitute attacks on democratic rights.

In California, the state practice of equating political protest with terrorism, and the utilization of this pretext to gather information on and infiltrate protest groups and dissenting political organizations, have become well established since September 11, 2001.

In 2003, an undercover agent, Aaron Kilner, working for the Fresno Sheriff’s department and assigned to its “anti-terrorist unit,” infiltrated the California antiwar group Peace Fresno. The group had opposed the Iraq war and the Bush administration’s attacks on civil liberties in the US. Kilner’s real identity was only exposed after his death in a motorcycle accident.

Last year, the California National Guard was investigated for spying on a Mothers Day demonstration at the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial in Sacramento. As the WWSWS reported, the unit was created in 2004 by Maj. Gen. Thomas Eres “as part of an expanding nationwide effort to integrate military intelligence into global antiterrorism activities” and was afforded “ ‘broad authority’ to monitor, analyze and distribute information on potential terrorist threats.”

The character of this latest revelation of government, or government-outsourced monitoring of oppositional political and antiwar protest groups illustrates that its ramifications extend well beyond the borders of California. If SRA International is engaged in mining masses of data and text on protest groups in California, what else is it preparing across the United States?

SRA International currently supports “the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the defense agencies, the Joint Chiefs of Staff organizations, the three military departments, the four military services, and the command structure,” its web site says. The corporation actively assists in and profits handsomely from the gathering and structuring of masses of data on US citizens, which can easily be used for the maintenance of a police-state apparatus in the US.



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