

# FBI's Hoover proposed internment of 12,000 “disloyal” Americans in 1950

David Walsh  
24 December 2007

Government documents released last week reveal that J. Edgar Hoover, longtime FBI director, proposed the internment of 12,000 Americans and the suspension of habeas corpus in 1950, at the outset of the Korean War. The proposal was included in a collection of documents declassified December 21 by the US State Department.

Hoover outlined his plan in a letter addressed to Rear Admiral Sidney Souers, who in 1946 became the first director of central intelligence and in the summer of 1950 was serving as special consultant to the president on military and foreign affairs.

Hoover sent his letter to Souers on July 7, 1950, less than two weeks after the outbreak of the Korean War. This was at the height of the Cold War anti-communist hysteria stoked up by the US political and media establishment.

The FBI director envisioned interning thousands of political opponents, the vast majority of them US citizens, suspending habeas corpus—the legal means through which an individual can seek relief from illegal detention—and establishing kangaroo courts to rule on the fate of those arrested.

The Bush administration, with the acquiescence of the US Congress, has proceeded along similar lines since September 11, 2001.

There may be few illusions still popularly held about Hoover, a fanatical anti-communist and decades-long conspirator against democratic rights. Nonetheless, the July 1950 memorandum makes chilling reading.

The FBI director writes to the White House, in the person of Souers, “For some months representatives of the FBI and of the Department of Justice have been formulating a plan of action for an emergency situation wherein it would be necessary to apprehend and detain persons who are potentially dangerous to the internal security of the country.”

Hoover envisions several types of emergency situations: a military attack upon or invasion of the US; an “attack upon United States troops in legally occupied territory” (i.e., an attack on American troops engaged in a colonial-style war or occupation, like the Korean War or the current Iraq

operation); or “rebellion” at home.

Hoover never explicitly spells out whether he believes any of these situations exists in July 1950, but the letter is clearly a call to action.

The FBI director recommends that in the case of a national emergency a proclamation be presented to the president for his signature (the bureau apparently had a prototype prepared) asserting “that in order to immediately protect the country against treason, espionage and sabotage, the attorney general is instructed to apprehend all individuals potentially dangerous to the internal security.”

The emergency proclamation would suspend the writ of habeas corpus in regard to those apprehended. The plan outlines post-facto legitimization by Congress of dictatorial rule, through the approval of a resolution to be passed by both houses, and the issuance of an executive order to “validate the previous presidential proclamation” (models for both of which were also included by the FBI).

Following these steps, the FBI would proceed to round up political opponents, “conduct necessary searches and seize contraband as defined in the plan.” The attorney general would forward to the FBI a warrant attached to a list of names “which have previously been furnished from time to time to the attorney general by the FBI.”

Hoover notes that “For a long period of time the FBI has been accumulating the names, identities and activities of individuals found to be potentially dangerous to the internal security through investigation. These names have been compiled in an index, which index has been kept up to date.” He explains to Souers that the index now contains some 12,000 names, of which 97 percent are US citizens.

Immediately upon receipt of the warrant and instructions, the various FBI offices were to arrest the individuals within their various jurisdictions. Hoover adds that “Each FBI Field Division maintains an index of the individuals within its territory, which index is so arranged that it may be used for ready apprehension purposes.” In other words, the accumulation of names of left-wing opponents was not then—and is not now—a mere bureaucratic exercise, but was

carried out as a necessary prelude to such a mass round-up.

The advanced state of the preparations is also indicated by Hoover's candid comment that the federal prisons to which the detained political opponents are to be conducted "have been confidentially surveyed" as to their size and suitability. Only in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, where presumably a disproportionate number of left-wingers resided, were the facilities considered to be inadequate. Arrangements had already been made with the military in those areas "for the temporary and permanent detention in military facilities of the individuals apprehended."

Provisions for the setting up of kangaroo courts were included in Hoover's plan. A Hearing Board, appointed by the attorney general and consisting of one federal or state court judge and "two citizens," would decide the given political prisoner's fate. This procedure would "give the detainee an opportunity to know why he is being detained and permit him to introduce material in the nature of evidence in his own behalf."

Hoover makes no mention of the right to legal counsel. He continues, "The hearing procedure will not be bound by the rules of evidence." This is the course of action the Bush administration has already taken in regard to the category of so-called "enemy combatants" imprisoned illegally in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

Hoover's proposal was a plan for police-military dictatorship in the US, made by one of the most powerful individuals in the US state apparatus. In fact, President Harry Truman did declare a state of emergency in December 1950, but Hoover's plan was never put into operation. It is unknown what discussion took place in the White House in response to Hoover's letter.

This should not be the slightest grounds for complacency. If it didn't "happen here," it almost did, and at a time when the US enjoyed the greatest economic and political advantage in its history.

The US ruling elite has spied upon and gathered information about political opponents since at least the immediately pre-World War I period. In the notorious Palmer Raids (1919-21), based on plans drawn up by Hoover, some 10,000 socialists and other left-wingers were arrested and many deported.

More recently, the CIA, on instructions from the Johnson and Nixon administrations, illegally compiled a computer index of some 300,000 names of American individuals and organizations in an operation code-named Chaos, at the time of mass opposition to the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s. The CIA worked in secret with local police departments across the US.

Under President Ronald Reagan, at least one large-scale operation was carried out as a rehearsal for mass arrests and

internment. Contemplating an invasion of Nicaragua to overthrow the Sandinista regime, the Reagan administration expected to encounter mass opposition. To counter this, in Rex-84 Alpha Explan (Readiness Exercise 1984), the Federal Emergency Management Agency, in association with 34 other federal civil departments and agencies, conducted a "civil readiness" exercise from April 5 to 13, 1984.

The operation reportedly anticipated civil disturbances, mass demonstrations and strikes that would affect the continuity of government. The military was authorized under such conditions to arrest political opponents and impose its rule.

Under the terms of National Security Decision Directive No. 52, issued by Reagan on April 6, 1984, as many as 400,000 people were targeted for arrest and confinement in former US Army bases—four times the number of Japanese-Americans interned by the Roosevelt administration during World War II.

More recently still, in 2006 the Congress passed and George W. Bush signed into law the National Defense Authorization Act. Among other measures, the act overturned the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878, which prohibited the military from intervening in the conduct of civilian government activities. The new law allows for the domestic use of the military in case of natural disaster, terrorist attack, or "other conditions in which the president determines that domestic violence has occurred to the extent that state officials cannot maintain public order."

Provisions of Bush's National Security Presidential and Homeland Directive of May 2007 complement the National Defense Authorization Act. Under the directive, in case of a national emergency, the president has the power to dispense with constitutional rule, create an interim government and appoint a "national continuity coordinator" to be filled by the assistant to the president for homeland security and counterterrorism.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**