

FBI terrorist watch list hits 1 million entries

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The FBI's Terrorist Screening Center acknowledged this week that there are more than 1 million names on its official terrorist watch list, a number that suggests the vast scale of the police-state measures undertaken by the US government on the pretext of waging a "war on terror."

It would be preposterous to suggest that these 1 million people are actually terrorists—in that event, Al Qaeda would have more troops than the US Army. Moreover, since an estimated 50,000 of those named are US residents, most of them citizens, this would mean hundreds of potential car bombers or airplane hijackers live in every major American city.

There is no legal restriction on who can be placed on the watch list, nor is there presently any legal right to have your name removed from the list once it appears. According to a 2007 report by the Government Accountability Office, an individual may be nominated to the list if they are subject to an ongoing counterterrorism investigation, or if the individual is the subject of a preliminary investigation "to determine if they have links to terrorism." The second category potentially includes the entire population of world.

The result has been daily acts of harassment and injustice, as individuals whose names supposedly match those who are alleged terror suspects suffer dire consequences: they can be stopped from boarding an airplane, denied entry into the US at a border, or denied a visa or other government permit.

Among the well-publicized cases, Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa, is on the watch list, as well as Evo Morales, currently president of Bolivia, and the late Saddam Hussein, the former president of Iraq, while he was being held in a US prison in Iraq. Thousands of Americans who share common names with supposed terrorists—Robert Johnson, Gary Smith, John Williams, David Nelson, Jim Robinson—have been

stopped from boarding planes or otherwise targeted.

The list includes at least one US senator, Edward Kennedy, and three members of Congress, John Lewis, Loretta Sanchez and Don Young, as well as a former US Attorney and an army sergeant flying home from deployment in Iraq. Particularly sinister are cases like those of James Moore, author of a critical biography of Karl Rove, entitled *Bush's Brain*, and CNN reporter Drew Griffin, placed on the list in May 2008, shortly after he did a series of investigative reports critical of the Transportation Security Administration.

According to a report Wednesday by *USA Today*, the FBI claims that 33,000 entries were removed last year in an effort to purge outdated information and remove people cleared in investigations. The agency also argued that the 1 million entries represent "only" 400,000 unique individuals, with the balance consisting of duplications due to misspellings, variant spellings and conflicting demographic information.

The FBI statement to *USA Today* confirms, eight months later, the estimate made public by the American Civil Liberties Union, which calculated, based on previous TSA figures about the growth rate of the watch list, that the total had reached the 1 million mark in July 2008.

The year-by-year increase has been staggering: 158,374 in June 2004, 288,000 in May 2005, 754,960 in May 2007 and an admitted 1,000,000 in March 2009, if not earlier. As an ACLU statement observed sarcastically, "Clearly, terrorists stand poised to replace suckers in P.T. Barnum's old adage, 'there's one born every minute.' "

The watch list is completely ineffective for its purported purpose of protecting the American public from terrorist attacks. While thousands of individuals have been "positively matched," according to the government, "the vast majority" of such matches result in the individual being released.

Moreover, as the ACLU pointed out last year, the names of actual terrorists are frequently withheld from the list provided to frontline screeners for the TSA. "That is because the government is afraid of revealing that those terrorists are even on the list," the organization wrote. "It has long been known that the government was withholding certain names from the airlines, but the Justice Department's inspector general seems to indicate that such withholding has also taken place with respect to other screeners, such as customs officials, State Department consular officers, local police, and others."

The watch list is more than just an example of the imbecility of the police mind, however. There is a definite political purpose, to accustom the American people, as well as millions of people overseas who may visit the United States, to the most intrusive surveillance and harassment when they travel.

While Obama took office claiming that his government would do away with some of the worst features of the Bush administration's assault on civil liberties, there has been no presidential directive to reform, let alone eliminate, such abominations as the million-strong terrorism watch list.

The House of Representatives passed a bill last month requiring the Department of Homeland Security to create an Office of Appeals and Redress, giving individuals whose names appear on the watch list a formal procedure for getting off it, but it is not certain that even this minimal gesture will ultimately pass the Senate and become law.

Instead, the executive branch is moving ahead with even more draconian information-gathering on travelers, under the new Secure Flight program, devised under Bush but being implemented under Obama. Under Secure Flight, the TSA, not the airlines, will check passenger names against watch lists, and only passengers cleared by the TSA will be given boarding passes.

Passengers will be required to supply considerably more personal data, including their birth date and sex, at the time they book their seats, and this data must exactly match their personal ID presented at the time they check in. That requirement takes effect soon on domestic flights and by late 2009 on international ones. The TSA will thus gain access to the personal information on all airline passengers, some 2 million

people each day. Officially, this information can be retained for no more than seven days, but there is no way to enforce that provision.

Federal authorities now claim that more information must be collected to avoid the repetition of "mistakes" like the identification of well-known public figures like Senator Kennedy and Congressman Lewis as potential terrorist threats. In other words, they are using the absurdities of the previous "anti-terror" efforts to justify even more reactionary and anti-democratic measures.



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