

The Newburgh Sting: A case of entrapment

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The Newburgh Sting, directed by David Heilbroner, HBO Documentary Films, 2014

The Newburgh Sting is an in-depth exposure of the FBI entrapment of four men from Newburgh New York, an impoverished town of about 30,000 some 60 miles north of New York City, on charges of attempting to bomb two synagogues in the Bronx and to shoot down jets leaving Stewart Air National Guard Base. The documentary, released by HBO, uses hundreds of hours of video footage, photographs, and aerial surveillance footage, gathered by the FBI but never released to the public.

The filmmakers also include interviews with lawyers, Newburgh residents, religious leaders, former FBI officials, and family members of the men, as well as clips from newscasts. Taken together, this array of material serves to demonstrate that James Cromitie, David Williams, Onta Williams (no relation to David), and Laguerra Payen were the victims of a government sting operation, with the media acting as a willing accomplice.

The Newburgh Sting offers a refreshing but limited critique of the war on terror and wholesale government attacks on democratic rights.

The documentary focuses on the work of FBI informant Shahed Hussain, who supplied the “Newburgh 4,” as the media dubbed the men, with money and equipment to carry out a plan he organized.

The film also shows the immense poverty faced by the residents of Newburgh, including the four men caught in the sting operation. Hussain is shown taking advantage of these conditions, luring Cromitie in particular, by flaunting his wealth, and promising exorbitant payoffs to everyone who went along with a plan he proposed. Hussain agreed to give Cromitie \$250,000 as payment for his part in the manufactured terrorist operations.

In one conversation with Hussain, Cromitie admits

that the other three men “will do it [Hussain’s plan] for the money. They’re not even thinking about the cause.” The legal implication of this statement is that they are set up since they would not be pursuing any terrorist plan without the government coaxing them.

David Williams agreed to participate in the plot in order to get money for his younger brother to have an operation. The film shows Williams’ mother, in tears, describing how her son was approached by Cromitie.

Williams was very hesitant about going along with Hussain’s plan to shoot a down a US Air Force jet using a Stinger missile. Williams stated at the time, “We don’t want to hurt nobody.” He was only willing to damage property in return for a payment.

Onta Williams was a factory worker who had spent some time in jail for non-violent crimes. According to one of his friends interviewed for the film, Onta was not particularly religious, and had no ideological reason to go along without the attack.

Laguerra Payen was the last to join the “conspiracy.” The film reveals that according to a medical report on Payen, he was mentally challenged and emotionally disturbed, having claimed to hear voices since his late teens. Payen, who was assigned to be lookout in Hussain’s plot, was promised food, money, and a job. Hussain also gave Payen food for three weeks prior to the arrest.

The film demonstrates that all those involved in the plan were completely dependent on Hussain for this operation. Hussain organized the plan, supplied weapons and money, and trained those involved in their assigned tasks. Friends, family members and legal counsel for the Newburgh 4, explain that it is likely that the four men were trying to con Hussain out of money before being arrested.

When it came time to actually go through with the plot to bomb the Riverdale Temple, the men proved to be incompetent. Aerial surveillance footage shows that

Hussain had to pull the car over and wire the fake bombs because Cromitie could not remember how to wire them himself. When the fake bombs were later picked up by police they discovered Cromitie had failed to flip a switch that would have allowed the bombs to be detonated (if they had been real).

The documentary touches on the overriding attack on democratic rights that has unfolded in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Mike German, a former FBI undercover agent, remarks, “Immediately after 9/11 there were actual FBI agents going through the hallway saying ‘the rules are off now, the rules are off’ ... so part of what the FBI did was treat the entire Muslim community as suspect.”

The documentary explains that the plot Hussain proposed to the four men must have required the oversight and coordination of FBI officials and members of the judiciary. Legal representatives interviewed make clear that the plot was orchestrated to capture the greatest media attention and secure the longest jail sentences by picking a target in New York City and incorporating a Stinger missile, which mandates a 25 year minimum sentence by law.

After a police bust where dozens of New York City police officers and FBI agents arrested the four men in front of the Riverdale Temple, the media immediately began denouncing them as terrorists. The documentary uses clips from various news sources, showing the media hounding David Williams’ family and religious leaders at the local mosque in Newburgh. Media sources also alleged that the Newburgh 4 met in prison and organized the plot inside a mosque, all claims that are proven false early on in the documentary.

The sole defense of the Newburgh 4 was that they were entrapped by the state. Sam Baverman, one of the defense lawyers says in the film, “The government conceded at the trial that these four defendants never had a plan, never had done this before, had no technology abilities to do this, had no access to these kind of weapons, had no access to the money to make these kinds of bombs, had no access to terrorists to come up with the ideas, had no access to anything, even cars to get to Riverdale or get to Stewart.”

The documentary shows that in seeking the conviction of the Newburgh 4 the prosecution relied on shocking the jury with footage of the men holding a Stinger missile and duffle bags containing what they

believed to be bombs. During the trial, Hussain was the sole witness and was discredited, as a criminal and chronic liar. He had also been able to turn on and off the cameras recording conversations with the accused.

While the film endeavors to explain why four impoverished men, and even others like them, would go along with such plot, it fails to probe why the government organizes these frame-ups. The filmmakers allow former-FBI officials and politicians to speak on sting operations as if they amounted merely to a mistaken policy that needs to be done away with in order to catch the “real terrorists.” That these “real terrorists,”—an example given in the film are the Boston bombers—have proven very few in number and often have connections to the US government is never mentioned.

The “sting” operations serve a definite political purpose, that of terrorizing the American public with manufactured terrorist threats. These are used to justify war abroad and the relentless assault on basic democratic rights at home. The Newburgh 4 and so many others are used as hapless fall guys in phony plots hatched by the government itself.

Despite these shortcomings the documentary still stands out for revealing how media hysteria and government operations work hand-in-glove to attack democratic rights. The logic of the exposure also shows a connection between economic inequality and the attack on democratic rights, possibly more than the filmmakers intended.



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