

America's Police State: Political Activists Facing Searches and Surveillance

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Since the the presidency of George W. Bush and continuing throughout the presidency of Barack Obama more and more Americans who are politically active are finding themselves monitored, harassed and searched. It is a trend that we must stand up to or we all my find ourselves on a government list merely for writing a letter, signing a petition or attending a protest.

Trend of Activist Searches Began Under Bush, Continues Under Obama

Series of Inspector General Reports Shows FBI Violating Constitutional Rights of American Peace Activists While Raids Occur in Illinois and Minneapolis

Earlier this week the FBI raided six homes of eight peace activists in Minneapolis and Chicago as well as a Minneapolis office of an antiwar group. Agents kicked down doors of homes with guns drawn, smashed furniture, and seized computers, documents, phones, and other materials without making any arrests. These groups do not use guns and bombs. They are not terrorists. Their "weapons" are leaflets, newsletters, and nonviolent demonstrations.

The FBI searches highlight a dangerous trend that has been building for nearly a decade: domestic surveillance of peace and other activists. Americans need to understand the context of these raids so they can work to stop the infringement of constitutional rights.

The raids took place just a few days after [a report of the Inspector General of](#) the U.S. Department of Justice examined 8,000 pages of documents from 2001 to 2006 and interviewed dozens of FBI agents. The report blasted the FBI for spying on anti-war activists, animal-rights groups, and environmentalists, calling them improper "terror" investigations "unreasonable and inconsistent with FBI policy." Among those targeted were the anti-war Thomas Merton Center, the Quakers, the Catholic Worker, Greenpeace, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and an individual Quaker peace activist. According to the Inspector General, there was "little or no basis" for the investigations.

[Another report](#) found that the FBI used lies and trickery to illegally obtain thousands of records, then issued after-the-fact approvals in an attempt to cover it up. Released in January of this year, the report was the result of another Justice Department investigation which built on a [2007 report](#) covering similar matters. The Inspector General focused on the FBI's unlawful misuse of the already-unconstitutional informal requests known as "exigent

letters” to demand information which they knew was illegal. The DOJ report described a “complete breakdown” of procedures within the FBI. According to the report, the [“FBI broke law for years in phone record searches.”](#) Agents repeatedly and knowingly violated the law by invoking nonexistent “terror emergencies” to get access to information they were not authorized to have.

This week another Inspector General report found that hundreds of FBI employees cheated on exams related to domestic surveillance. The [report](#) described how they consulted with others while taking the exam even though that was forbidden. Others used or distributed answer sheets or study guides that provided test answers. Still others exploited a computer flaw that revealed answers. The agents were being tested on 2008 guidelines that FBI employees must follow when conducting domestic investigations.

Nor do these reports cover all the incidences of domestic surveillance of civic activists. Former FBI special agent and whistleblower, [Colleen Rowley, reports](#) that “in 2008, we found out through a Freedom of Information request that there are 300 pages of . . . agents trailing a group of students in Iowa City to parks, libraries, bars, restaurants.” [The documents requested by David Goodner, a former member of the University of Iowa’s Antiwar Committee under the Freedom of Information Act, show](#), the investigation into activities of peace groups in Iowa City involved staking out homes, secretly photographing and video taping members, digging through garbage and [even planting a mole to spy on the peace activists up close](#). Known as the Wild Rose Rebellion, the protesters were described by the FBI as an “anarchist collective.” In an interview with The Des Moines Register, [the FBI defended its actions](#) because of allegations that certain people were possibly going to engage in criminal activities to disrupt the national conventions of one or both major political parties. The group’s plans were to help organize nonviolent acts of civil disobedience, such as street blockades, at the 2008 RNC convention.

[Pennsylvania awarded a \\$125,000 no-bid contract](#) to an [Israeli-American](#) consulting firm called the [Institute of Terrorism Research and Response](#), which spied on [peace groups](#), citizen activists, civic groups and critics of the Rendell administration. The project was supposed to protect Pennsylvania citizens by gathering intelligence on potential terrorist threats, but the private contractor, hired by the state’s Department of Homeland Security, fed information to state officials about the activities of religious groups, education advocates, BP protesters, anti-tax protesters, and just about anybody who criticized state government.

In [Maryland](#), Homeland Security and Intelligence Division of the Maryland State Police conducted undercover operations to spy on people who support progressive viewpoints. Undercover Maryland State Police officers repeatedly spied on peace activists and anti-death penalty groups in recent years. The Maryland State Police [classified 53 nonviolent activists as terrorists](#) and entered their names and personal information into state and federal databases that track terrorism suspects, the state police chief acknowledged in 2008. In 2009, the state police acknowledged [far more extensive surveillance](#) with records showing that troopers monitored — and labeled as terrorists — a wide range of activists. Investigators monitored activists protesting weapons manufacturer, Lockheed Martin. They watched two pacifist Catholic nuns from Baltimore, CODE PINK and the DC Anti-War Network, which was inaccurately, designated a white supremacist group. The surveillance program became public because of documents released during a trespassing trial for peace activist Max Obuszewski, the nuns and another activist arrested during an antiwar rally at

the National Security Agency. The documents showed that Baltimore intelligence officers were tracking them.

In fact this type of surveillance by the FBI, [NorthCom](#) and state and local police have been [reported in many parts of the country](#), among them are Alaska, California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, New York and Washington.

This current escalation of domestic surveillance of U.S. citizens began under President Bush and has continued under President Obama. Throughout U.S. history there has been a constant battle between the constitutional rights of citizens and domestic surveillance of political activists, especially peace advocates. The FBI has a long history of abusing its authority. If we do not act to curtail these actions we are all in danger of being spied on and added to terrorist watch lists for doing nothing more than attending a rally, signing a petition or holding a sign.

Steps are urgently needed to protect the basic constitutional rights of peace activists and others. These include:

- President Obama needs to speak out against the surveillance of Americans who are merely exercising their constitutional rights. As a former law professor he knows the long history of such abuse and how important it is to contain enforcement.
- Removal of FBI director Robert Mueller. His tenure since 2001 has been littered with abuses of domestic spying. The Inspector General has concluded Director Mueller provided "inaccurate and misleading information" to Congress. Mueller also failed to put in place adequate procedures to ensure the law is obeyed and to ensure agents are aware of the laws regarding domestic surveillance.
- Congress needs to hold hearings to investigate the extent of domestic spying on Americans who are merely exercising the rights to free speech, to assembly, and to petition the government. These fundamental political rights need to be protected by tightening up the laws regarding domestic surveillance which were loosened by the PATRIOT Act.

[You can send all three letters by clicking here.](#)

The escalation of wars abroad by the Obama administration is moving forward alongside escalation against antiwar activists at home. The groups targeted in the most recent raids in Illinois and Minnesota, while Marxist in ideology, endorsed and supported the election of President Obama. Their [Political Report noted](#) "*Obama's election represents a rejection of the Bush administration policies and a desire amongst the people for a progressive agenda from the government.*" Now we know that the Obama administration is moving forward with Bush-era policies that target anti-war political dissent at the same time that more Americans oppose Obama's wars.

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