

Antiwar Group Infiltrated by the FBI

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Infiltrated by feds, antiwar group turns on photographer

The first time federal agents infiltrated the Broward Antiwar Coalition was in July 2003, two months before a planned protest against President George W. Bush, according to one member of the South Florida activist group.

The second time was in September 2003, two months before the infamous Free Trade Area of the Americas meeting in downtown Miami, which resulted in several lawsuits against the Miami Police Department for using excessive force against protesters.

And the third time was less than a year ago, just days before the Organization of American States meeting in downtown Fort Lauderdale, said Ray Del Papa, one of the original members of the activist group.

Each time, it was a different person who had joined their group or befriended one of its members, asking prying questions and knowing just a little too much personal information about the activists. Each time, the individual seemed to contradict statements they had made about themselves and their background. And each time, that person would disappear within a few months, never to be heard from again.

So last month, when NBC revealed that the federal government had been spying on antiwar groups around the country, including several in South Florida, it confirmed what Broward Antiwar Coalition members had suspected for more than two years: that Big Brother had been watching all along.

And it left them with a simmering rage — and paranoia from being spied upon — that exploded on the streets of Miami earlier this month when one of its members allegedly attacked a photojournalist, landing the activist in jail. The incident revealed the untold price of domestic surveillance: that people who feel they are being spied upon are liable to turn on each other.

Kate Healey, 44, was charged with one count of misdemeanor battery. She declined to be interviewed for this article.

Photographer attacked on suspicion of surveillance

The incident began during a demonstration against Supreme Court nominee Samuel Alito Jan. 9 in downtown Miami. Members of the Broward Antiwar Coalition were among several groups protesting against Alito. As usual, a number of counter-protesters, including a group of pro-lifers, had shown up to voice their opposition to the activist groups.

Photojournalist Danny Hammontree said he was taking pictures of a screaming argument between an anti-Alito protester and a pro-life woman waving a Bible, when the anti-Alito woman turned to him and demanded: "Who the fuck are you?"

Hammontree told her he was a freelancer who specializes in shooting protests. The woman, later identified as Healey, told him he was not allowed to take her photo because it was against the law, he said.

"I said, 'I have as much right to photograph you as you have to be here protesting,'" he said.

"Then she attacked me."

Hammontree said that Healey stormed up to him as he was holding the camera up to his face and shoved the lens hard into his eye.

"Then she started punching me in the chest and body," he said. "It didn't really hurt me. It was really more of a threat against my equipment than against me."

Watching the whole incident unravel was a member of Miami's Civilian Investigative Panel, a watchdog group that was established to monitor the Miami Police Department, after a series of questionable police shootings on civilians that eventually landed several cops in jail.

"A lady from the CIP came and pulled her off me," Hammontree said.

Dean Lautermilch, another South Florida photojournalist who specializes in protests, said Healey initially confronted him before turning her anger towards Hammontree.

"She was screaming at one of the Christians and during a pause, I tapped her on the shoulder and said hello," he said. "Then she started screaming at me, 'Don't you understand, we got infiltrated by the FBI. We don't know who to trust anymore.'"

"Danny then took a photo and she turned on him."

After taking statements from witnesses, police asked Hammontree if he wanted to press charges against Healey, which he did.

"I did it out of principle because I want them to know that in the future, I'm not going to tolerate them attacking me," he said. "Especially with all my equipment. I work for myself so I don't have a company to replace my camera gear."

Suspicion festers among group members

Meanwhile, Del Papa, who was furious at watching one of his fellow group members arrested, accused Hammontree and Lautermilch of being spies for the FBI.

"He was getting all crazy, the cop had to hold him back," Hammontree said. "He was saying, 'I know you guys are with the FBI' or some crazy shit like that. So I took his photo."

Del Papa said he is suspicious of Lautermilch because of an incident last year when the photojournalist refused to photograph another Broward Antiwar Coalition member getting arrested during a protest against the Central America Free Trade Agreement in July 2004.

“He tries to tell me he is exercising his right to take photographs, but when it comes to taking a picture of one of our guys getting arrested, he refuses,” Del Papa said. “And he likes to take a lot of portrait shots, real close up photos of our faces. If you’re photographing a protest, why do you need portraits?”

Lautermilch said Ft. Lauderdale Police intimidated him and Hammontree from taking the photo of the arrest that day.

“It was clear from their body language that if I took that photo, they would have come after me,” he said. “We felt terrible and we apologized several times, but I’m not going to lose \$5,000 of Nikon equipment over the incident that happened in the tunnel.”

Christian Minaya, 25, said he was initially arrested for “prowling”, even though he was on a public sidewalk. That charge was later reduced to trespassing. Minaya said he does not suspect the photographers of being informants.

“I’ve seen the cops confiscate cameras so that is probably why they wouldn’t take the photo,” he said.

Both photographers laughed at the idea that they are FBI informants.

“I’ve never even gone to any of their meetings,” Lautermilch said, adding that he takes portrait shots because that is his photography style. “I always try to make them look good.”

Hammontree said that he is likely to have his own FBI file because he grew up in a hippy commune.

“The whole irony is that I’m on their side,” Hammontree said. “I am antiwar and anti-Bush. But I’m against anyone who is going to attack me for taking their photo.”

While Hammontree and Lautermilch were photographing protesters during the anti-Alito rally, members of the Broward Antiwar Coalition were also photographing people whom they believed to be undercover cops.

“There were like four undercover police officers there,” said Paul Lefrak, one of the founding members of the Broward Antiwar Coalition.

“We go up and photograph them. They’re always these lone, buff guys, standing in the crowd, looking around. They try to avoid getting photographed. We tell them we just want their photograph.”

Lefrak said he did not witness the incident between Healey and the photojournalists, but he pleaded with Hammontree to drop the charges. Lefrak is fully aware the group has been infiltrated in the past, but would not go as far as to associate either of the two photographers with the FBI.

“I would only make an accusation of someone being a cop or an informant if I had strong evidence,” he said. “But I’m not going to say I will vouch for (Lautermilch). It’s a question mark.”

Group was infiltrated three times

In the past, the infiltrators were usually more obvious.

For example, the first time the group was infiltrated was in 2003, when Del Papa was befriended by a new employee at his job in a hobby store.

“He would come in and work on Saturdays. He was an active duty officer stationed in Miami. And he knew a lot of stuff about me. What my interests were, people I associated with outside of politics.

“On his first day, he drops the name of a close friend of mine who lives in Baltimore. That was a red flag.”

And as they got to know each other, the man kept prying into events that Del Papa attended with the Broward Antiwar Coalition.

“He told me he was a sympathizer to the cause and that his wife is a socialist,” Del Papa said.

Del Papa, who is a professional model builder, said the man claimed to be a model aficionado.

“But as we started working together, I realized the man didn’t know a whole lot about the hobby,” Del Papa said. “I never trusted him. I always kept him at a distance.”

Two months later, after the man stopped showing up to work, never to be heard from again, another man started showing up at the group’s meetings. On Nov. 11, during the Free Trade Area of the Americas meeting in Miami, the man showed up with a woman they had never seen before.

“They were dressed in Black Bloc attire, but he was wearing Nikes,” Del Papa said. “Nobody in the Black Bloc wears Nikes. And he said he was from Pittsburgh, but when I asked him about Pittsburgh, his knowledge was very limited.’

Not surprisingly, the man and the women disappeared after the FTAA protest.

Just last year, in the days leading to the protest against American States meeting in downtown Fort Lauderdale, Del Papa spoke on phone to another member about the need for a medic at the protest. Less than 24 hours later, a woman showed up out of the blue at a group meeting, claiming to be a medic.

On the day of the protest, the woman organized a group of young people to plant themselves in front of the police. The youths sat down less than 15 feet from a group of police officers, who were fully dressed in riot gear.

“It was 4 p.m. and we were supposed to disperse at 5 p.m. because that was when the permit was going to expire,” he said. “We weren’t sure if the kids were going to disperse and we didn’t want to give the cops an excuse to do what they did in Miami.”

They managed to get the young people to stand up before the 5 p.m. deadline without incident. The woman never returned.

Lefrak said the Broward Antiwar Coalition is a plaintiff in a lawsuit filed by the Center for

Constitutional Rights against the federal government over the spying.

“To me, it just shows that anytime the government resorts to oppression against popular movements, it shows they fear the mass movement,” Lefrak said. “That is something that can encourage us. And we’re not afraid of it. We will continue to do our part.”

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