

Turning the US army against Americans

An antiwar activist has been accused of spying for the US army, raising legal questions the Obama administration must answer

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It was an [odd little story](#), tucked well inside the front section of this past Sunday's New York Times.

An antiwar activist in the state of Washington had been exposed as an undercover informant for the US army, stationed at massive Fort Lewis, south of Tacoma. And in one of those Kafkaesque twists for which our government is renowned, the army is now investigating itself to determine how such an arrangement came to pass.

Although the Times gave no credit, the story had been [broken on 28 July by Democracy Now!](#), a leftwing television programme co-anchored by Amy Goodman, a longtime progressive journalist. For nearly an hour, two former associates of John Towery – a civilian employee of the army – explained how they learned their fellow activist was in fact a military spy.

“We hung out,” said Brendan Maslauskas Dunn, who filed the public-records request that inadvertently outed Towery, who had been going by the name John Jacob. “We gave workshops together on grassroots direct democracy and anarchist struggle. I mean, he was a friend.”

Fellow activist Drew Hendricks offered a weird twist, telling Goodman that, as far back as 2007, Towery identified himself as an army employee and offered to provide Hendricks with “observations and inside knowledge of operations on Fort Lewis”.

The picture that emerges is worthy of a cheap spy novel. If Maslauskas Dunn and Hendricks are correct, then Towery truthfully told antiwar activists that he worked for the army, but lied about his name and real purpose: gathering intelligence on his new associates and what threat they might have posed. (According to the Times, antiwar groups in Washington have attempted to “disrupt military shipments”.)

Moreover, Towery's alleged activities would almost certainly have been illegal. According to two lawyers whom Goodman interviewed, Larry Hildes of the National Lawyers Guild and Mike German of the American [Civil Liberties](#) Union, such spying would violate the Posse Comitatus Act, which prohibits the use of American military forces for domestic law-enforcement operations. The law was [weakened during the Bush years](#), though Hildes and German told Goodman that operations such as that attributed to Towery remain illegal.

Towery's alleged spying is yet another sign that [Barack Obama](#)'s reluctance to come to

terms with the legacy of [George Bush](#) and [Dick Cheney](#)'s legacy is simply not tenable. By attempting to move on without accountability, Obama is becoming complicit in the very activities against which he ran.

The Bush-Cheney administration's obsession with running roughshod over constitutional and legal principles is by now well-established, with torture being just the most infamous example. Only a week ago, the New York Times revealed that [Cheney had pushed hard in 2002 to send troops to suburban Buffalo](#) in order to arrest several al-Qaida suspects. It's difficult to imagine why Cheney would want to do such a thing other than to set a precedent. In any event, Bush said no.

And as we know, Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and their fellow neoconservatives weren't above casting institutions such as the military and even the CIA as weak and unpatriotic when it suited their purposes.

General Eric Shinseki, after all, was cashiered from his position as army chief of staff after he dared to tell the truth about [how many troops would be needed to carry out a successful invasion and occupation of Iraq](#). (Shinseki is now Obama's secretary of veterans affairs.)

And when former diplomat Joseph Wilson, on a mission for the CIA, revealed he had found no evidence that Saddam Hussein sought to purchase uranium in Niger, Team Cheney retaliated by [exposing his wife, Valerie Plame Wilson, as an agency operative](#).

The Towery allegations are not the first time it's been reported that the government has infiltrated the rather impotent antiwar movement. A little more than a year ago, for instance, it was revealed that the [Maryland state police had spied on peace activists](#) in that state. But the alleged misuse of the army places this on a different level, both ethically and legally.

Not to get ahead of the story, but if the Towery story bears out, then it's difficult to imagine he was alone. In that sense this could prove to be reminiscent of [Cointelpro](#), the FBI's secret, illegal programme, which kept tabs on dissidents from 1956 to 1971. We need to know the truth about what happened during the Bush-Cheney years, and what may still be happening, with or without Obama's knowledge.

Since his inauguration more than six months ago, Obama has been half-hearted, at best, about exposing his predecessor's wrongdoing. Maybe he's right - maybe he can't investigate the Bush White House and govern the country at the same time.

But if that is the case, then Obama should quietly encourage officials like Vermont senator Patrick Leahy, who has made it clear that he'd like to [conduct a no-holds-barred investigation](#).

Much as Obama would like to put it all behind us, he can't. And he shouldn't.

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