

U.S. accused of spying on those who disagree with Bush policies

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While the White House defended domestic surveillance as a safeguard against terrorism, a Florida peace activist and several Democrats in Congress accused the Bush administration on Friday of spying on Americans who disagree with President Bush's policies.

Richard Hersh, of Boca Raton, Fla., director of Truth Project Inc. of Palm Beach County, told an ad hoc panel of House Democrats that his group and others in South Florida have been infiltrated and spied upon despite having no connections to terrorists.

"Agents rummaged through the trash, snooped into e-mails, packed Web sites and listened in on phone conversations," Hersh charged. "We know that address books and activist meeting lists have disappeared."

The Truth Project gained national attention when NBC News reported last month that it was described as a "credible threat" in a database of suspicious activity compiled by the Pentagon's Talon program. The listing cited the group's gathering a year ago at a Quaker meeting house in Lake Worth, Fla., to talk about ways to counter military recruitment at high schools.

Talon is separate from the controversial domestic-surveillance program conducted by the National Security Agency. Bush has acknowledged signing orders that allow the NSA to eavesdrop without the usual court warrants, prompting an outcry from many in Congress.

Bush plans to tour the NSA on Wednesday as part of a campaign to defend his handling of the program.

"This is a critical tool that helps us save lives and prevent attacks," White House spokesman Scott McClellan said on Friday. "It is limited and targeted to al-Qaida communications, with the focus being on detection and prevention."

The Defense Department's Talon program collects data from a wide variety of sources, including military personnel and private citizens, Pentagon spokesman Greg Hicks said.

"They are unfiltered dots of information about perceived threats," Hicks said. "An analyst will look at that information. And what we are trying to do is connect the dots before the next major attack."

To Hersh and some members of Congress, the warrant-less surveillance and Talon are all a part of domestic-spying operations that threaten civil liberties of average Americans and put

dissenters under a cloud of suspicion.

“Neither you nor anybody in that (Quaker) church had anything to do with terrorism,” said Rep. Robert Wexler, D-Fla. “The fact is, the Truth Project may have a philosophy that is adverse to the political philosophy and goals of the president of the United States. And as a result of that different philosophy, the president and the secretary of defense ordered that your group be spied upon.

“There should not be a single American who today remains confident that it couldn’t happen to them.”

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