

Peace activists stage spy-in'
Homeland Security cars bracket outdoor protest at federal building
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The watched became the watchers Monday.

Trench coats and shades. The surreptitious passing of a mysterious black briefcase. Cameras and binoculars focusing on -- none of your business.

Someone singing the refrain to "Secret Agent Man."

It was guerrilla theater staged outside the Celebrezze Federal Building about 7:30 a.m. by the Northeast Ohio Anti-War Coalition (NOAC).

Some two dozen members of NOAC and other groups affiliated with the coalition dressed in exaggerated spy gear to protest government surveillance of a NOAC meeting in Cleveland last November, and similar monitoring of other peace groups, including the Quakers.

Hence, "Operation Turn the Tables," as one sign read near the man wearing a CIA -- "Citizens Intelligence Agency" -- jacket.

"Google This!" another sign dared.

NOAC member Sarah Morton said the demonstration was intended to plant a covert tongue in a very serious cheek -- matching a perceived government gaffe with an equally ludicrous gesture. To "make people think about the ridiculousness of this federal action," as Morton said.

The "spies" were bracketed by Homeland Security cars parked behind them, and security keeping a watchful eye in front of them from the building on East Ninth Street and Lakeside Avenue.

Peering back at them through comically fake glasses, under a wide-brimmed fedora matching her tan trench coat, Penny "Peacenik" (her term) Allen, of Cleveland Heights, said of the recent government surveillance, "I can't imagine why they feel we're threatening enough to spy on us.

"This is similar to the early '70s Nixon administration -- a tremendous overreaction to people who are, in fact, not threatening anyone," she added. "We simply want to build a better world."

Walt Nicholes, 82, and his wife, Nina McLellan, 70, of Cleveland Heights, sported homemade cardboard-tube "binoculars" for the spoof. But both said they've been around long enough to see some potentially disturbing trends developing, reminiscent of the bygone "Red Scare" days of the 1950s led by Sen. Joseph McCarthy.

Nicholes noted, "One of the classic symptoms of state fascism begins with the surveillance of innocent, law-abiding people, which we are. That's really dangerous."

Slyly scanning her surroundings through eyeholes cut in her Plain Dealer, a trench-coat-clad Maria Smith, of Cleveland, doubted the street theatrics would have much impact on government policy.

"But it's important to say something," she added. "It's the drop in the ocean that causes the ripple."

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