

Community Public Hearing on Pentagon Spying
February 13, 2006, 6:30 pm
Akron, Ohio
Opening Statement

Welcome everyone!

My name is Dana Williams, and I am a Co-Clerk of the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee (or AFSC), the sponsoring organization of this public hearing. The purpose of this event is to allow Akron-area residents the opportunities to speak to elected public officials and other civil liberty advocates about an incident of concern that occurred here in Akron in March of last year, in less than a half-mile radius of the very room we are meeting now.

First, I would like to introduce our guests..... Representative Sherrod Brown's aide Mike West and ACLU representative Frank Kunstel. Senators George Voinovich and Mike DeWine and Representative Tim Ryan were invited, but decided not to attend or send aides from their offices.

These guests are here to listen to the testimony of Akron-area citizens and residents, and to comment on that testimony. They are also here to tell you what should be and is being done regarding the issues discussed tonight.

There is a sign-up list to give testimony. If you have not signed up yet, please see Rosalita Rowe in the back of the room, who has a clipboard. I will call on people in clusters of 3-5 in order that they signed up to testify. People will be given up to 3 minutes each. If the guest panelists have any clarifying questions, they can ask the testifiers. Such questions should not exceed 1 minute in length. Please note that Patti Longville who is seated here up front will notify each testifier with 1 minute, 30 second, and no time left. When your time is up, please try to wrap up in respect to others wishing to testify.

AFSC, the sponsoring organization, is a Quaker-affiliated peace and justice organization, founded in 1917. It was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947 for its efforts to help feed starving children during World War II and in helping to rebuild Europe after the war. The local Northeast Ohio AFSC has existed since the 1970s in Akron, and has been a stable and central organization in the area's peace movement since that time.

George Bush Jr.'s war policy in Iraq is coming under considerable criticism, even from Democrats and Republicans, criticisms that include the untrue premises for the war, admitted to openly by Bush. Although much recent press coverage has been given to the President's endorsement of the National Security Agency's tapping of phone conversations in the United States, less focus was given to information discovered by NBC News of a Department of Defense database, when printed-out totals 400 pages in length, of events considered to be domestic "threats". In the only 8 pages that are presently available from that 400 page document, two events occurred within Northeast Ohio, and one in Akron which occurred on the second-year anniversary of the Invasion of Iraq.

The Department of Defense is the governmental organization responsible for the control of the military. It is not a law enforcement agency, and does not have a mandate for any domestic investigation. According to the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, the Department of Defense is now directed by the President, through the Secretary of Defense.

I'd like to give a brief overview of the event in question, an overview which individuals or groups that give testimony are likely to add to. The Northeast Ohio AFSC and another group called People for a Change began planning a political demonstration to coincide with the second-anniversary of the Invasion of Iraq for March 19th, 2005. Thousands of similar protests were planned throughout the state of Ohio, the United States, and world for that day, to protest the US government's actions against the people of Iraq and the US military's ongoing occupation of that sovereign nation.

The second-anniversary demonstration began at one of Akron's oldest parks, called Grace Park. The Akron Beacon-Journal reported approximately 200 people in attendance. There were individuals from all over the region—from Cleveland to Canton, Wooster to Kent, and many from Akron and its suburbs. Attendees ranged in

age from newborns less than a year old to senior citizens in their 80s. A local economic justice organization called Food Not Bombs gave away free food as people gathered.

As the demonstration's start time arrived, I—acting as an AFSC committee member and a co-planner of the demonstration—ascended to the top of a 30-gallon drum placed on a moving dolly, to address the crowd. I welcomed the crowd to a park that has a long political history of free speech—from meetings which helped to organize the 1913 general strike of Akron's rubber industry, coordinated by the Industrial Workers of the World to a tent-city camped in the park to protest against the lack of shelter space for the city's homeless population in the early 1990s.

The demonstration was scheduled to move from the Park to a number of locations in downtown Akron that had symbolic significance. Our first stop was 46 Summit Avenue, the site of a military recruiting station. AFSC and other peace organizations have asserted that the military exploits the crushing poverty of America's working class and communities of color, to build its volunteer army. We wished to send the message that we did not want the military to recruit from our communities, but instead provide low-cost education to the same disadvantaged persons to improve their lives and communities, instead of fighting a foreign war. We crossed over East Market St., obeying all traffic regulations—even using cross-walks—and gathered on the public sidewalk in front of the recruiter station. There, two young adults—Dena Lee (with the Church of the Brethren) and Tony Wolter (with the Akron Catholic Worker community)—spoke of their commitments to refuse participation in any wars, all while standing on-top of the same oil drum we brought with us from the park.

From the recruiter station, we traveled towards Mill Street, down to South Main Street, where we stopped at 121 South Main, the location of offices of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The FBI has been a central actor in the expanding persecution of immigrants and law-abiding citizens alike in the US in recent years. Former Attorney General John Ashcroft's efforts to ruthlessly expand policing powers have run rough-shod over both our Constitutional and Human Rights. Local immigration-rights attorney and current AFSC committee member Farhad Sethna spoke at the FBI office, atop the oil drum. He held in his hand a pocket-sized copy of the US Constitution, which he quoted directly from during his speech.

The crowd departed the sidewalk in front of the FBI offices, and moved north on Main Street, stopping at 2 South Main Street, in front of the US Federal Building. The Federal Building is a common point of protest for Akron-area citizens, a symbolic embodiment of government and thus a catalyst for popular “redress of grievances”. Kent musician Sue Jeffers performed a song at the Federal Building. Then, Debra Calhoun, AFSC's director of the Africa Initiative Program spoke about the effect that war has and continues to have upon the US's African-American community, specifically the detrimental effects of military recruiting. I spoke once more, noting the need for further political activism in opposition to violent and destructive foreign policies, suggesting counter-recruitment activities, the creation of alternative media to circumvent the restrictions on information from the corporate and state media, and looking into the actions of local war-profiteers such as the Lockheed-Martin Corporation.

Finally, sheets of paper bearing names of American and Iraqi war casualties were distributed to the audience. Collectively, at the same time, the entire crowd of 200 read the names on their lists. The din, chaos, and sadness generated by this was personally both moving and sickening at the same time. The sheets of paper were placed in two cardboard coffins which had been brought with on the march. One coffin each was delivered to Ohio Senators Mike DeWine and George Voinovich. Then, the spigot on the oil barrel was turned, and liquid trickled out. Water, dyed with red-food-coloring came out of the barrel, to make the point that one of the primary goals of the US invasion of Iraq was to secure US oil corporations access to that countries oil reserves—which, only a few months after the invasion, it was decided that no new Iraqi government would nationalize that country's oil reserves, but instead control was turned over to ten of the world's largest oil corporations (including Chevron, BP, and Shell) who would be permitted to profit on the Iraqi people's supply of oil. The red-colored water coming from our oil barrel symbolized the unacceptable cost of this theft—human blood. This ended our demonstration.

Before we begin tonight's testimony, I would like to note that, in addition to AFSC, this event is also being sponsored by the Greater Cleveland Immigrant Support Network, the Summit County Progressive Democrats, Akron Food Not Bombs, the Asian American Bar Association, the League of Women Voters—Akron Area,

Campus Community Against War at the University of Akron, and the Social Action Committee of the Unitarian-Universalist Church in Akron.

If you wouldn't mind, please turn off your cell phones. Thank you.

If you could please attention to the time keeper, on the side of the room, who will indicate when you have one minute left for your testimony, please finish up your statement when your time runs out.

Also, if you'd like to state your name and city of residence for the record, please do so. But, it's understandable in this political climate if you prefer not to.

Finally, this hearing is being videotaped, and copies of the hearing will be sent to the Representatives and Senators who chose not to attend.