

The Plain Dealer
Columns
U.S. must stop spying on citizens
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Greg Coleridge

Not only is the National Security Agency listening to private phone calls and reading e-mail, the U.S. military is also spying on Americans.

On Dec. 14, an article appeared on the MSNBC Web site: "Is the Pentagon spying on Americans?" In addition to the revelation that the U.S. Department of Defense had infiltrated peace groups around the country, the article contained an excerpt from a 400-page DOD database obtained by NBC News. Among the 43 incidents listed on the database were two in Northeast Ohio: a march and rally in Akron sponsored by the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee and a planning meeting in Cleveland of the Northeast Ohio Anti-War Coalition.

More than 200 citizens gathered in Akron on March 19, 2005, to commemorate the second anniversary of the start of the Iraq war. We marched to a military recruitment center where two people, one connected to the Akron Catholic Worker community, spoke. We then marched to the local FBI office where an attorney, who was holding up a copy of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, spoke. We proceeded to the Federal Building where several people made remarks. We read the names of 1,500 U.S. troops killed in Iraq and more than 1,000 Iraqis killed. We deposited those names in two cardboard coffins, which we later delivered to Sens. Mike DeWine and George Voinovich. We also spilled water tinted with red food coloring on the sidewalk to symbolize the blood being spilled on all sides in Iraq; we said that the war was for oil and greed.

We publicized the event widely as a peaceful march and rally. We didn't block traffic. We didn't destroy property. We didn't threaten anyone in our speeches. Yet, we were photographed and monitored by our own government and the event showed up on a U.S. military database - for nothing more than expressing our First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and freedom of assembly.

This is chilling, intimidating and outrageous. This should be totally unacceptable in a democratic society. Citizens were exercising their rights as guaranteed in the Bill of Rights under the United States Constitution. Yet our own government considered these actions, according to the DOD database, a "threat." In addition, the event was listed as "Open/Unresolved."

Any government that considers its own citizens threatening when they speak freely in public, assemble freely and organize freely is itself a threat to freedom and democracy.

It is time we place the rights and powers of people above the rights and powers of the U.S. military. Spying on citizens exercising their political views is anti-democratic and must end.

Last month, the ACLU filed Freedom of Information requests on behalf of the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee, the Northeast Ohio Anti-War Coalition and several individuals connected to each group. Requests were made to the Department of Defense Counterintelligence Field Activity, the FBI, the Cleveland Police Department and the Akron Police Department. To date, no responses have been received.

These government entities must turn over these files immediately. This would be the first step toward taking back what we have lost - our freedom and democracy.

Coleridge is director of the Economic Justice & Empowerment Program of the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee.

This is the original document sent to the Plain Dealer (before they edited it).

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Proposed Title: Spying on US Citizens is Anti-Democratic

It's not just the National Security Agency or the FBI spying on Americans, it's also the US military.

Last December 14, an article appeared on the MSNBC website entitled "Is the Pentagon spying on Americans?" In addition to the revelation that the Department of Defense (DOD) had infiltrated peace groups around the country, the article contained an 8-page excerpt from a 400-page DOD database obtained by NBC News. Among the 43 incidents listed on the database were two in Northeast Ohio, a march and rally in Akron sponsored by the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and a planning meeting in Cleveland of the Northeast Ohio Anti-War Coalition (NOAC).

More than 200 citizens gathered in Akron on March 19, 2005 to commemorate the second anniversary of the start of the Iraq war. We marched to a military recruitment center where a Brethren and person connected to the Akron Catholic Worker community spoke. We then marched to the local FBI office where an attorney holding up a copy of the US Constitution and Bill of Rights spoke. We then proceeded to the Federal Building where several people offered remarks. At the end, we read the names of 1500 killed US troops in Iraq and more than a 1000 Iraqis killed. We then deposited those names in two cardboard coffins, which we later delivered to Senators Mike DeWine and George Voinovich. We also spilled water with a little red food coloring from a 55-gallon drum on the sidewalk to symbolize the blood being spilled on all sides in Iraq and that the war was for oil and greed.

We publicized our event widely beforehand as a peaceful march and rally. We didn't block traffic. We didn't destroy property. We didn't threaten anyone in our speeches. Yet, we were photographed and monitored by our own government and showed up on a US military database for doing nothing more than expressing our First Amendment freedom of speech and freedom of assembly rights.

This is chilling, intimidating, and outrageous. This should be totally unacceptable in a democratic society. Citizens were exercising their rights as guaranteed in the Bill of Rights under the United States Constitution. Yet our own government considered these actions, according to the DOD database, as a "threat." In fact, the event was listed to be "Open/Unresolved."

Any government that considers its own citizens threatening who in public speaks freely, assemble freely, and organize freely is itself a threat to freedom and democracy. The US government considers threatening human persons who exercise their First Amendment rights, yet continues to protect the constitutional free speech rights of business corporations who corrupt and pervert our political system through political campaign contributions and lobbying under the guise of "free speech." The US government sneaks into meetings unannounced and uninvited and claims it's legal, yet wouldn't dream about sneaking onto the private property of a business corporation without a warrant, claiming that corporations possess 4th Amendment protections against unwarranted searches and seizures.

This is a clear double standard. The government honors, protects, and affirms the constitutional "so-called" rights of business corporations but ignores, if not tramples, on the rights of human beings.

It is time we place the rights and powers of people over the rights and powers of the US military and business corporations. Spying of citizens exercising their political views is anti-democratic and must immediately end. Turning over all files the government has on the political activities on American citizens must occur immediately. These are beginning steps to take back what we have at this point lost, if we ever had to begin with – our freedom and democracy.

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