

Pentagon's domestic spying operations target opponents of Iraq war

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Global Research, December 16, 2005

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 16 December 2005

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

As Congress moves toward passage of a bill to extend the USA Patriot Act, scattered reports are surfacing in the US media of a massive expansion of domestic spying operations by the US military. The reports make clear that US citizens engaged in peaceful and legal political activity in opposition to the war in Iraq and aggressive military recruiting tactics are being monitored by military intelligence agencies and included in rapidly expanding secret data banks.

The White House is, according to a November 27 report in the *Washington Post*, considering a proposal by a presidential commission on intelligence established by President Bush that would empower a recently formed Pentagon intelligence agency to “carry out domestic criminal investigations and clandestine operations against potential threats inside the United States.” The panel asserted that this step could be taken by presidential order and Pentagon directive without congressional authorization.

The proposal would effectively scuttle the 1878 Posse Comitatus law that bars the military, with few exceptions, from carrying out domestic policing operations. It is only one link in a chain of already existing operations and pending measures that add up to a vast expansion of the domestic role of the military and the creation of a “Big Brother”-style apparatus for government spying and political repression.

That the military is using the threat of terrorist attacks as a pretense to spy on opponents of the war was documented in a segment broadcast Tuesday on the NBC Nightly News program. NBC investigative correspondent Lisa Myers reported that NBC News had obtained a secret 400-page Defense Department document listing more than 1,500 “suspicious incidents” across the country over a recent ten-month period.

One of the items listed as a “threat” was a meeting held by a group of activists a year ago at a Quaker Meeting House in Lake Worth, Florida to plan a protest against military recruiting at local high schools. Myers said the Defense Department data base obtained by NBC News included nearly four dozen anti-war meetings or protests. Among them was an anti-war protest held last March in Los Angeles, a planned protest against military recruiters last December in Boston, and a planned protest last April in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

A separate press report noted that the Pentagon data base also mentioned weekly protests at an Atlanta, Georgia military recruiting station and an anti-war protest at the University of California in Santa Cruz.

These limited revelations in and of themselves reveal that the Bush administration and the Pentagon, with the collusion of congressional Democrats as well as Republicans, have

pushed aside limits on military domestic spying that were imposed following congressional hearings in the 1970s on Pentagon spying against civil rights organizations and opponents of the Vietnam War.

As Myers put it in her NBC News segment: “The Defense Department document is the first inside look at how the US military has stepped up intelligence collection inside this country since 9/11, which now includes the monitoring of peaceful anti-war and counter-military recruitment groups.”

The *Washington Post* article of November 27, by veteran intelligence reporter Walter Pincus, listed two major fronts in the moves to expand the military’s role in domestic spying and police operations. The first involves what Pincus called a “little known” Pentagon agency—the Counterintelligence Field Activity, or CIFA. This agency was created three years ago, ostensibly to coordinate Pentagon security efforts, including protecting military facilities from attack.

Bush’s presidential commission on intelligence, established in February of 2004, is calling for CIFA to be transformed into an agency that has, according to Pincus, “authority to investigate crimes within the United States such as treason, foreign or terrorist sabotage or even economic espionage.”

CIFA operates behind a screen of official secrecy. Its size and budget are classified. It presently serves to collect and analyze reports from military bases and other defense installations across the US on so-called “suspicious activity.” These submissions, called Talon (threat and local observation notice) reports, can, according to a 2003 memo signed by then-Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, consist of “raw information reported by concerned citizens and military members regarding suspicious incidents.”

Thus CIFA maintains a vast database of unsubstantiated reports submitted by informants on the activities of citizens and residents of the US. There is no public accounting for what happens to this information once it has entered the military intelligence data network. The number of Talon reports is itself classified.

The second major effort to expand the military’s domestic spying operations involves legislation being pushed by the Pentagon on Capitol Hill that would establish an exception to the Privacy Act, allowing the FBI and others to share information about US citizens with the Pentagon, the CIA and other agencies, as long as it was deemed that the information was related to foreign intelligence.

Kate Martin, director of the Center for National Security Studies, said the measure “removes one of the few existing privacy protections against the creation of secret dossiers on Americans by government intelligence agencies.” She added that the Pentagon’s “intelligence agencies are quietly expanding their domestic presence without any public debate.”

The *Washington Post* article also notes that the Northern Command, established after 9/11 as the first-ever military command for the US mainland, maintains intelligence centers in Colorado and Texas that “fuse reports from CIFA, the FBI and other US agencies, and are staffed by 290 intelligence analysts.” That number, Pincus writes, is higher than the roughly 200 analysts working for the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, and “far more” than those at the Homeland Security Department.

In addition, each of the military services has launched its own program to collect domestic intelligence. The *Post* quotes a Marine Corps order approved in April of 2004 that states the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity will be “increasingly required to perform domestic missions,” and as a result “there will be increased instances whereby Marine intelligence activities may come across information regarding US persons.”

The ominous implications of the measures being pushed to further expand military spying on Americans are underscored by the résumé of the chairman of the presidential commission on intelligence which recommended expanding the powers of CIFA. This commission, set up in the wake of the US military’s failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, was ostensibly empanelled to investigate the so-called “intelligence failure” in Iraq.

Its chairman was Lawrence Silberman, a retired judge on the US Court of Appeals for Washington DC. He is a long-time Republican political operative who has played a key role in facilitating and covering up covert government operations of a flagrantly anti-democratic character.

In 1980, Silberman served as a Reagan campaign aide and was dubbed the campaign’s “ambassador to Iran” for his behind-the-scenes contacts with the Khomeini regime. According to some accounts, these contacts were aimed at forestalling Iran’s release of the American hostages being held at the US Embassy in Tehran until after the 1980 election—an “October surprise” that would have benefited Reagan’s opponent, President Jimmy Carter.

Silberman was rewarded with a judgeship on the Washington Court of Appeals. In that capacity, he, together with his fellow justice David Sentelle, a former aide to the arch-right-wing Republican Senator Jesse Helms, voided the convictions of Lt. Col. Oliver North and Admiral John Poindexter for their roles in the Iran-Contra affair. Silberman’s intervention in 1990 played a critical role in sabotaging the investigation by Iran-Contra Special Prosecutor Lawrence Walsh.

The Iran-Contra affair involved massive White House crimes, including illegal support for the Contra terrorists who killed thousands of Nicaraguan civilians, illegal arms shipments to Iran, and the establishment of a secret paramilitary force to conduct military and intelligence operations behind the backs of Congress and the American people.

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