

The Fourth Amendment Has Just Been Cancelled

Lawrence Hagerty, October 30, 2001

Benjamin Franklin must be rolling in his grave these days. You remember him, don't you? He was the one who said, "Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." I wonder what he would have to say about the men and women who hold the reins of power in Washington these days. With more hoopla than debate, they just voted to turn this nation into an entry-level police state.

A brief inventory of the changes brought about by the recently enacted anti-terrorism bill, ironically titled "The USA PATRIOT Act," include:

- The government may now search our homes and offices surreptitiously and without a court order
- The government may now read your email and follow your Web surfing habits without a court order
- The government may now hold non-citizen suspects for up to six months without filing any charges against them
- The government may now demand to see your financial records and medical records without first obtaining a court order
- And the act defines 'domestic terrorism' so broadly that officials now have the power to target, as terrorists, people who engage in acts of political protest

The list goes on, but you get the idea. Freedom has taken a back seat to paranoia, but this is nothing new to us. Abraham Lincoln blatantly ignored the U.S. Constitution during the Civil War, and most people just looked the other way. During World War I, people like Eugene V. Debs were imprisoned for as long as 10 years for speaking out against U.S. involvement in the war. During the 1950s we jailed dissenters under the guise of fighting communism. Let's at least be honest about it, in times of national turmoil we routinely eliminate many of our hard-won civil liberties.

Our nation's chief law enforcement officer, Attorney General John Ashcroft, has been very clear in stating his belief that emergencies call for a maximum exercise of government power and a flexible interpretation of the Constitution. Following their boss' lead, the FBI is now advocating the use of drugs and torture to obtain information from suspected terrorists. And Vice-President Cheney tells us that this war on terror will not end in our lifetimes. So get used to it America, the land of freedom and justice for all is now officially a myth.

Recently a 22 year old man (who fits no racial profile, I might add) was not allowed to board an airplane after National Guard troops objected to a novel he was reading. While this may only be an isolated incident, it does not bode well for the future.

What if analysts are correct in predicting that oil dynasties in the Middle East will be overthrown by popular uprisings? Such events would cause serious disruptions to the U.S. supply of oil. If that happens, will persons who now oppose drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge be branded as anti-American, or worse, terrorists?

Even before the bombing began, the President's personal spokesman warned Americans to "be careful what you say." And the prestigious Gilmore Commission on terrorism has recommended secret, extra-judicial courts to deal with cyber-crime. Under the guise of a war against terrorism, our leaders now have free rein to restrict all kinds of behavior they disapprove of. For example, Congress has already branded Internet gambling as terrorist-related, and has proposed legislation to stop that form of entertainment.

Like the ill-conceived and ultimately unwinnable War on Drugs, this new world-wide war on terrorism ignores all questions regarding the underlying causes of these problems. It has become unpatriotic to even ask such questions as "Why do terrorists exist, and why do they have such an intense dislike of America?" For those whose drug of choice is power, these questions are not important. What is important, they believe, is to expand the power of their police state until no voice but their own can be heard. Let us hope that the American people are wise enough to vote them out of office in the near future.

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