

Brattleboro Reformer

Watching the watchers

Saturday, December 17, 2005 - Last week in this space, we wrote about our concerns about the Patriot Act and the erosion of civil liberties in the United States.

Some may have thought what we wrote was over the top. But two stories that appeared in the news this week reinforces our view that not only does the Bush administration not care about the Constitution or civil liberties, it also is quick to confuse dissent with disloyalty.

NBC News reported that the U.S. military has been spying on peaceful anti-war and counter-military recruitment groups. The military has been collecting data on what it calls "suspicious incidents," more than 1,500 over a 10-month period. In reality, it was tracking people who oppose the Iraq war.

It is reminiscent of the widespread spying and infiltration of anti-war groups by the military in the 1960s and 1970s.

During the Vietnam War, more than 100,000 American citizens were investigated by the military and the abuses were so great that Congress passed a law in 1982 limiting domestic spying by the military.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, those laws were circumvented by the Bush administration. The Pentagon created a new database called TALON (Threat and Local Observation Notice) to keep track of activists and anti-war incidents.

By law, the military can gather this type of information if a legitimate threat exists. But the reports are supposed to be discarded after 90 days if no credible threat exists.

NBC found that the information was not being assessed and was not being discarded. Instead, it is accumulating and getting in the way of surveillance of legitimate threats to national security.

Domestic spying on Americans has greatly increased since 9/11. The New York Times reported Friday that, in 2002, President Bush secretly authorized the National Security Agency to start spying on Americans without having to seek court-ordered warrants that had been required for domestic surveillance.

The NSA has monitored the international telephone calls and e-mails of thousands of people inside the United States without court approval. This marks a major shift for the agency, whose job it is to spy on communications abroad.

The Bush administration has claimed the need to do this sort of spying because of the threat of terrorism. Following the law would undermine the nation's ability to protect itself, they claim.

We say nonsense to that. As the NBC and Times stories illustrate, the spying that is being done is of dubious value and adds little to national security. It also raises our suspicions that the Bush administration isn't particularly interested in laws it doesn't like.

That is why the current debate over the Patriot Act is so important. It's not that far a slide down the slippery slope from democracy to police state when a government can spy on its citizens for any reason at all and do so with impunity.

We should be proud that our representatives in Congress -- Sens. Patrick Leahy and James Jeffords and Rep. Bernard Sanders -- have been out in front fighting for our civil liberties. The accumulated evidence of the four years since 9/11 has shown that on this issue, the Bush administration cannot be trusted.