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The Latest New "War on Terrorism"

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The declaration of the Bush administration to wage open-ended "war" against international terrorism will have definite implications for dissent at home. They estimate the campaign will last five to ten years.

In wartime, the US government has always used fear to expand its powers and suppress opposition to its policies. This suggests that the Arab and Muslim American communities will find themselves at the forefront of the struggle to prevent the stifling of dissent. Already accused of being a "Fifth Column," they may confront a situation like that of the Japanese American community after Pearl Harbor. Internment camps are not a far-fetched scenario in the event of another attack like the twin towers.

Legislative measures and coercive actions taken after September 11, touted, as "necessary tools" to fight terrorism and achieve domestic security, are in fact tools to silence and intimidate dissent at home. This repression is expected to intensify in the coming years, especially if public support for the "war on terrorism" wanes.

This process is becoming an integral part of the established modus operandi of powerful, entrenched organizations on every level of the government. Aided with a corporate-owned media, the government can maintain social control without detracting from their public image and the perceived legitimacy of its methods of government. These policies are evolving into an institutionalized social domination compatible with imperial policies perpetuated abroad.

We must derive from history the necessary lessons to preserve freedom and peace, and protect the civil and human rights won by intense popular struggles for many decades. To that end, let us examine four periods of US history that share a similar political climate with what we are experiencing today:

The Fifties: McCarthyism

The anti-communist hysteria known as McCarthyism in the 1950s actually started during the 1940s, WWII era. The Alien Registration Act passed by Congress on 29 June 1940 made it illegal for anyone in the United States to advocate, abet, or teach the desirability of overthrowing the government. It required all alien residents in the United States over 14 years of age to file a comprehensive record of their personal and occupational status and a statement of their political beliefs. Within four months, 4,741,971 aliens had been registered.

The main objective of the Alien Registration Act was to undermine left-wing political groups in the United States. The House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which the Congress established in 1938, became the vehicle to investigate people suspected of "unpatriotic behavior"

The investigation into the Hollywood Motion Picture Industry is a stark example of the curtailment of freedom of speech and silencing of dissent. HUAC interviewed 41 "friendly witnesses" working in Hollywood. During their interviews, they named nineteen people in the filmmaking industry accusing them of holding left-wing views. Ten refused to answer any questions on constitutional grounds. They became known as the Hollywood Ten. All were found guilty of contempt of congress and sentenced to between six and twelve months in prison.

The Sixties and Seventies: COINTELPRO

In the 1960s a secret FBI program known as counterintelligence programs (COINTELPRO) to silence dissent was initiated. COINTELPRO was later exposed and officially ended. But there is evidence that it persisted and that clandestine operations to discredit and disrupt opposition movements have become an institutional feature of national and local government in the US.

The government used infiltrators and informers not only to spy on political activists, but also to discredit and disrupt legitimate constitutional protected activities. The FBI and police also waged psychological warfare from the outside--through bogus publications, forged correspondence, anonymous letters, telephone calls etc. They used harassment, intimidation, including eviction, job loss, break-ins, vandalism, grand jury subpoenas, false arrests, frame-ups, and physical violence. Government agents either concealed their involvement or fabricated a legal pretext. In the case of Black and Native American movements, they used outright political assassination. These covert tactics, as shown by the U.S. Senate's investigation of COINTELPRO included but were not limited to the following:

Bogus leaflets, pamphlets, etc.: The FBI routinely put out phony leaflets, posters, pamphlets, etc. to discredit dissenters. In one instance, agents revised a children's coloring book that the Black Panther Party had rejected as anti-white and gratuitously violent and then distributed a cruder version to backers of the Party's program of free breakfasts for children, telling them the book was being used in the program.

False media stories: The FBI's own documents reveal collusion by reporters and news media that knowingly published false and distorted material prepared by Bureau agents. One such story accused Jean Seberg, a pregnant white film star active in anti-racist causes, of carrying the child of a prominent Black leader. Seberg's white husband, the actual father, sued the FBI for causing the stillbirth of their child, his wife's breakdown and eventual suicide.

Forged correspondence: The U.S. Senate's investigation of COINTELPRO uncovered a series of letters forged in the name of an intermediary between the Black Panther Party's national office and Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver, in exile in Algeria. The letters proved instrumental in inflaming intra-party rivalries that erupted into the bitter public split that shattered the Party in the winter of 1971.

Anonymous letters and telephone calls: During the 60s, activists received a steady flow of anonymous letters and phone calls, which turned out to have been from government agents. Some threatened violence. Others promoted racial divisions and fears. Still others charged various leaders with collaboration, corruption, sexual affairs with other activists' mates, etc. As in the Seberg incident, inter-racial sex was a persistent theme. The husband of one white woman involved in a bi-racial civil rights group received the following anonymous letter authored by the FBI: "Look, man, I guess your old lady

doesn't get enough at home or she wouldn't be shucking and jiving with our Black Men in ACTION, you dig? Like all she wants to integrate is the bedroom and us Black Sisters ain't gonna take no second best from our men. So lay it on her man--or get her the hell off [name]. A Soul Sister"

False rumors: Using infiltrators, journalists and other contacts, the Bureau circulated slanderous, disruptive rumors through political movements and the communities in which they worked.

Other misinformation: A favorite FBI tactic uncovered by Senate investigators was to misinform people that a political meeting or event had been cancelled. Another was to provide phony addresses for events, stranding out-of-town conference attendees who naturally blamed those who had organized the event. FBI agents also arranged to transport demonstrators in the name of a bogus bus company, which pulled out at the last minute.

Pressure through employers, property owners, etc.: COINTELPRO documents revealed frequent overt contacts and covert manipulation to generate pressure on activists. For example, pressures from parents, proprietors, employers, college administrators, church superiors, welfare agencies, credit bureaus, and licensing authorities to force activist to give up.

The Eighties: Reagan's "war on terrorism"

During the US military interventionist policies in Central America, especially against the Nicaraguan and El Salvadorian revolutions, the Central American solidarity movement was severely targeted. The case of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), an organization critical of U.S. policy in Central America, is an illustration of the repression suffered by this movement. From 1983 to 1985, the FBI conducted a nation-wide investigation of CISPES and other domestic groups whose only common denominator was their opposition to US policy in Central America. FBI agents infiltrated campus meetings, eavesdropped on private telephone conversations, photographed peaceful political events, illegally broke into offices to steal documents, and visited activists at home and at work to question and intimidate them and their employers.

This was not limited to CISPES, the FBI collected information on the political activities of 1,330 groups opposed to US policy in Central America. Throughout, the FBI did not uncover any criminal conduct, and found no evidence of any terrorism or support of terrorism.

The nineties: The new "war on terrorism"

The Los Angeles Eight deportation case, brought against supporters of Palestine in 1987, changed the legal climate for all immigrants. In the 1990s, the ideological grounds of exclusion and deportation that had been incorporated into immigration laws in the early 1950s at the height of the McCarthy hysteria began to change to reflect new global realities. The Soviet Union collapsed, and Communism no longer presented an immediate challenge. So it was replaced by Terrorism as the great enemy, and the government began to move accordingly. New legislation and laws were sought to deal with this new reality at home and abroad. During litigation in the Los Angeles Eight case, Congress acted to repeal the

infamous McCarthy era McCarran-Walter Act and enacted in its place the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1990. The anti-Communist provisions in the McCarran-Walter Act were merely replaced with new anti-terrorism provisions. Immigrants could no longer be deported for advocating "world Communism," but could still be deported for membership or affiliation with an alleged terrorist organization. After the first World Trade Center and the Oklahoma City bombing, during Clinton presidency, Congress swiftly passed the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (AEDPA), This Act tremendously curtailed civil liberties by authorizing the use of secret evidence in courts in violation of the basic right to due process.. Since then, the Immigration and Naturalization Service has initiated secret evidence cases around the country, resulting in the incarceration of immigrants of Muslim and Arab descent. The government's evidence has always collapsed when legal due process was applied. The rights to rebut evidence, confront one's accusers, and meaningfully cross-examine witnesses are all principles that lie at the heart of the liberties the Constitution seeks to protect. Yet the government sacrificed all of these principles without any proven benefits to security. This resulted in a chilling effect on constitutionally protected activities of Arab American groups. After September 11, repressive measures similar to (COINTELPRO) and the other periods mentioned above have been used against Arab and Muslim Americans. Arab and Muslim individuals and organizations across the country reported increasing government harassment and disruption of their work. Racial and ethnic profiling became a law enforcement tool. More than 1200 Arabs and Muslims were detained without charges. Two Muslim charitable organizations were shut down and their assets frozen on unproven charges of aiding terrorist organizations. Employees reported FBI visits at workplaces and meetings with their employers. Flying while Arab is like driving while black became a say to illustrate Arab-looking people's treatment at airports. There were also incidents of suspected political purging from Arab American organizations under governmental pressures. In the current political climate of legalized COINTELPRO tactics through the PATRIOT Act, and the HOMELAND SECURITY Act, a new face has been given to a new reality. The empowerment of the FBI and police, and the expanded role of the CIA and the military, leaves us only one safe assumption-- that extensive government covert operations are already underway to neutralize today's opposition movement before it can reach the massive level of the 60s. The government is using the tragedy of New York to reinforce fear of Arabs and Muslims. Racists are attacking and accusing them and their culture of terrorism. The Christian Right is waging a campaign of bigotry and hate against Islam and its Prophet and adherents. A new industry exploiting the fear and insecurity of the American people is flourishing, while promoting ultra-hawkish, ultra right-objectives.

The authoritarianism, which has long been creeping around in advanced capitalism, has begun to surface. Those who question American power are stigmatized as enemies of democracy. Add to them those who "blame America first", or those who "condone and support terrorism", and those who are "helping the enemy", and all must be silenced. Media pundits and so-called terrorism experts crowded the glass screen with opinions and expertise that are merely a mask for racism and bigotry.

On the foreign policy front, now that Afghanistan's pipeline routs are secured, the next step will obviously be to place Iraq's vast oil resources under direct US control. This renders any resistance to US domination of the region virtually impossible. This makes Palestinian resistance the last hurdle to this US grand imperial design. To crush this resistance, the US has found the perfect bulldozer, the brutal Israeli Prime minister, Ariel Sharon. The Palestinian struggle is the last colonial war, and the last battle against foreign military occupation in the world. This is the threshold between a colonial past and a vision of a peaceful future for all. We cannot, as some on the main stream left would like, ignore the Palestinian

issue or, using the deceit of "objective symmetry", equalizing the victim with the victimizer. In many ways, the Palestinian cause is the compass of the international movement for peace and justice; it gives it moral direction and political clarity.

In conclusion, the similarities of today's repressive measures with past wartime tactics to repress dissent and stifle debate of foreign and domestic policies are striking. The qualitative difference is in the much more advanced and capable technological resources that are available in the hands of the government. The coming together of the civil coercive agencies responsible for implementing such measures, and the legislative branch, with a cooperative main stream media, and a weakened judicial branch, and a politicized army, is constructing a comprehensive, powerful and effective social control system on an international scale that surpasses anything we have seen in the past. Coupled with the lessons of history, the sophistication of these matrixes of control and domination have evolved to such an extent that the 1984 big brother analogy shrivels in contrast. Under these circumstances, there is no reason to think we can eliminate the neo- COINTELPRO simply by electing better public officials. This is not to dismiss the importance of elections, but it comes second to mobilization and grassroots empowerment. The battle must be waged in the streets, and not merely in the voting booth. Only through sustained public education and mobilization, by a broad coalition of political, religious, civil and human rights groups, and national liberation solidarity movements, can we expect to stop repression and protect the Bill of Rights. We must not be cowed by the scope of this challenge. Dissent is most indispensable when it is hardest to voice. This is a time to speak intelligently and act creatively, boldly and courageously, but above all with a collaborative spirit and a unity of purpose among all progressive forces for change.

Michel Shehadeh is a respondent of the Los Angeles Eight Case. Seven Palestinian and a Kenyan national, wife of one of the Palestinians, had been arrested in 1987 and incarcerated in maximum-security cells for 23 days under charges of "Aiding Terrorism". The government is still pursuing its attempt to deport the respondents, despite the government's failure to provide a shred of evidence of wrongdoing on their part for the past 16 years.

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