

Loving oneself to death

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If truth is the first victim of war, then civil liberties at home will be among the chief casualties of the current U.S. administration's "war against terrorism," apart, of course, from untold civilian deaths abroad. The signs have been there for all to see ever since Mr. Bush signed the misnamed Patriot Act into law shortly after September 11.

This Act has opened up virtually everyone to surveillance since, under its provisions, "espionage or terrorist acts [do] not have to be the primary purpose of the investigation but only a 'significant purpose.'" This wording drastically changes the requirements of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (signed after Watergate), that already "permits sweeping electronic surveillance, telephone eavesdropping and surreptitious searches of residences and offices." But in practice, federal agents must seek clearance for this from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court which, so far, had insisted on maintaining "a well-defined wall separating domestic police agencies from spy agencies."

On that basis, reports Declan McCullagh, the court recently had turned down the Justice Department's request to remove such "procedural barriers" to monitoring and instead had asked the Department "to protect the privacy of Americans in these highly intrusive surveillances and searches." The court also had "accused the FBI of submitting incorrect information under oath in more than 75 cases, including one signed by then-FBI Director Louis Freeh." The Justice Department appealed this decision on the grounds that the Patriot Act makes "any such wall obsolete and unnecessary," and a couple of days ago, in "an unexpected and near-complete victory for law enforcement," the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court of Review overturned the lower court's ruling, giving the "police broad authority to monitor Internet use, record keystrokes and employ other surveillance methods against terror and espionage suspects" (Declan McCullagh, "Secret U.S. court oks electronic spying," CNET News.com, November 18)..

These days, of course, the prime suspects are Muslims and Arabs who have been living in fear since 9/11 as Shaker Lashuel writes. "Our freedom of speech, assembly and worship [he says] are under attack. Thousands of Muslims and Arabs have been interrogated, at least 1,200 detained and hundreds deported after secret court hearings for minor visa irregularities, according to the American Civil Liberties Union. Muslims are refraining from visiting mosques and praying in public" (Alter.net.org, November 26).

The irony—as Lashuel points out—is that many Arabs and Muslims "sought freedom in America from security agencies that monitored them, detained them and censored them, only to relive those conditions under the American flag." (A joke making the rounds in some Muslim circles these days is that, in adopting such practices, the U.S. has at last become a Muslim country.) Meanwhile, most—though not all—other Americans are turning a blind eye to the suspension of the civil rights of Muslims and Arabs perhaps because, says Lashuel, they've fallen victim to the media's fear and hate-mongering.

One can, of course, blame the media for a lot of things, but in the present instance, it isn't the only culprit. A long and deeply entrenched history of racism—both a cause and a consequence of the genocide of indigenous peoples and the institution of slavery—makes it difficult for people who claim to belong to “one nation under God” actually to feel much solidarity with one another. In such circumstances, it has been easy to target Arab and Muslim minorities though, eventually everyone is at risk inasmuch as a law, once it is on the books, can be extended beyond the initial groups it sought to target or control.

Many Americans, however, don't seem to mind this prospect not only because they fear and hate Muslims, but also because the attack on civil liberties is being mounted in the name of love—quite literally, a Patriot Act—making it hard for most people to question it without feeling like they're betraying their country. And thus laws and policies that one assumes people might otherwise have had the good sense to reject as morally repugnant and politically unsound are being woven into the social and political fabric of society.

In the process, this “former land of refuge” has become unrecognizable, writes Lashuel. “Ethnic profiling, unchecked surveillance, secret detentions and psychological intimidation of Arab and Muslim Americans already have reached levels that many of us only knew previously under repressive Middle Eastern regimes.” Even though Muslims have not been interned in concentration camps, like Japanese Americans during World War II, they “are being placed into an information-age corollary—a system of digital surveillance that amounts to psychological apartheid.”

All this makes me wonder why it has been so easy to package fear, paranoia, and hatred as love, and why so many people seem willing to kill what they love for, surely, stifling the heart of political freedoms is to destroy the very foundations of America.

Understandably, many Muslim immigrants are confused about what their roles should be in these times even though our choices are, or should be, clear. When one is naturalized as a citizen, one not only forswears political allegiance to all other entities, but one also swears loyalty to the Constitution. One is not asked to, and one does not take, an oath to support a specific person, or administration, or policies. As such, patriotism for Muslims lies in contesting attempts to subvert the Constitution, instead of apologetically rushing forward (in the manner of some Muslim organizations) to protest our loyalty not only to this administration, but even to police agencies as they go about undermining our civil rights. Such obsequiousness cannot possibly serve the Muslim community well.

Neither can fear. Lashuel's story—that a 20-year old friend “ended his once daily trips to the mosque for fear that his steadfast observance would be misinterpreted”—strikes me as both sad and ultimately self-negating. As the mother of a young son who also is at risk, I still say that surrendering our practices and identities as Muslims and embracing fear and servitude will not win the day.