

A Menace to Liberty

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There is no more subtle, more quietly debilitating menace to the liberty of citizens than to have high offices of government occupied by men with no clear understanding of the nature and requirements of liberty. Evidence accumulates that such men are now in power in Washington.

In the interpretations of these men, the magisterial commandments of the Constitution in all their iron rigor turn gray and shapeless. Thus, the Attorney General of the United States matter-of-factly asserts his authority to tap anyone's telephone or electronically invade anyone's home or office without a court order. He places his personal opinion of the public's best interests higher than the Fourth Amendment, higher than laws passed by Congress. He knows best.

The First Amendment states unequivocally: "Congress shall make no law . . . abridging . . . the right of the people peaceably to assemble." Yet the Federal Bureau of Investigation assigns secret agents to monitor conservation meetings on Earth Day and to prepare confidential reports about them.

When a Senator of the United States makes public one of these documents and rightly complains about such practices, the Attorney General blandly says that there might have been dangerous radicals at these meetings. The fact that many people passively accept this excuse shows how corrupted American standards of liberty have become. No one should forget that when the most radical dissenter speaks at a public meeting, he is only exercising a constitutional right. But the Attorney General says violence might have broken out. This rationalization is itself an affront to truth since F.B.I. agents leave peacekeeping in such situations to the local police.

Much more important, a government resting upon the consent of the governed cannot sustain itself by far-flung police activities, compiling millions of dossiers on its own citizens and ferreting into every kind of public meeting and private conference. The Founding Fathers would have found these practices bewildering and incomprehensible in the free republic which they constructed.

Again, the First Amendment clearly protects the freedom of the press and of every citizen to speak. Yet there is now in the Vice-Presidency of the United States a man who uses the prestige of his high office to vilify private citizens whose opinions differ from his and to try to cow television and the press.

The Secretary of Commerce journeys to Athens and publicly praises the gang of brutal thugs who have robbed the Greek people of their freedom. The Declaration of Independence enjoined upon Americans "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind." What would Thomas Jefferson think—indeed, what must the rest of the free world think—of American officials who praise tyrants? Yet the United States still regards itself as the champion of freedom in the world.

Of all these affronts to liberty, the most depressing

are those of the Attorney General. Since he is the chief law officer, citizens have a right to look to him to obey the rule of law and set the example for others. But this Attorney General articulates a pervasive distrust of the people, a fundamental misunderstanding of civil liberties and due process. In asserting the power to tap telephones without a court warrant, he declares that it is impossible to distinguish between foreign spies and domestic rebels. "Experience," he says, "has shown greater danger from the so-called domestic variety."

How sharply these words contrast with those of Jefferson: "Sometimes it is said that man cannot be trusted with the government of himself. Can he, then, be trusted with the government of others? Or have we found angels in the forms of kings to govern him?"

Tyranny, like fog, can come creeping in on cat's feet. It comes little by little, chipping away at this freedom and chivvying that right. It adopts the habits and practices of a police state while blandly assuring everyone that no police state exists. It intimidates in the name of "fairness" and denies that conformity and obedience are what are really desired.

Liberty is not dead in this country but neither is it secure. Vigilance is more than ever required.