

# 'America Is Not a Repressive Society'

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"The outcry against wiretapping is a tempest in a teapot. There are 210 million Americans. There are only a few hundred wiretaps annually, and these are directed against people who seek to subvert our democratic form of government. Law-abiding citizens have nothing to fear."

By LEWIS F. POWELL

RICHMOND, Va.—At a time when slogans often substitute for rational thought, it is fashionable to charge that "repression" of civil liberties is widespread. This charge—directed primarily against law enforcement—is standard leftist propaganda. It is also made and widely believed on the campus, in the arts and theater, in the pulpit and among some of the media. Many persons genuinely concerned about civil liberties thus join in promoting or accepting the propaganda of

the radical left.

A recent syndicated article by Associated Press writer Bernard Gaver cited several such persons. According to Prof. Charles Reich of Yale, America "is at the brink of . . . a police state." Prof. Allan Dershowitz of Harvard declares the "contraction of our civil liberties."

The charge of repression is not a rifle shot at occasional aberrations. Rather, it is a sweeping shotgun blast at "the system," which is condemned as systematically repressive of those accused of crime, of minorities, and of the right to dissent.

Examples ritually cited are the

"plot" against Black Panthers, the indictment of the Berrigans, the forthcoming trial of Angela Davis, and the mass arrests during the Washington Mayday riots.

The purpose of this article is to examine, necessarily in general terms, the basis for the charge of repression. Is it fact or fiction?

There are, of course, some instances of repressive action. Officials are sometimes overzealous; police do employ unlawful means or excess force; and injustices do occur even in the



courts. Such miscarriages occur in every society. The real test is whether these are episodic departures from the norm, or whether they are, as charged, part of a system of countenanced repression.

The evidence is clear that the charge is a false one. America is not a repressive society. The Bill of Rights is widely revered and zealously safeguarded by the courts. There is in turn no significant threat to individual freedom in this country by law enforcement.

Solicitor General Griswold, former dean of the Harvard Law School and member of the Civil Rights Commission, recently addressed this issue in a talk at the University of Virginia. He stated that there is greater freedom and less repression in America than in any other country.

So much for the general framework of the debate about alleged repression. What are the specific charges?

The attack has focused on wiretapping. There seems almost to be a conspiracy to confuse the public. The impression studiously cultivated is of massive eavesdropping and snooping by the F.B.I. and law enforcement agencies. The right of privacy, cherished by all, is said to be widely threatened.

Some politicians have joined in the chorus of unsubstantiated charges. Little effort is made to delineate the purposes or the actual extent of electronic surveillance.

The facts, in summary, are as follows: The Department of Justice employs wiretapping in two types of situations: (1) against criminal conduct such as murder, kidnapping, extortion and narcotics offenses, and (2) in national security cases.

Wiretapping against crime was expressly authorized by Congress in 1968. But the rights of suspects are carefully safeguarded. There must be

a prior court order issued only upon a showing of probable cause. The place and duration are strictly controlled. Ultimate disclosure of the taps is required. There are heavy penalties for unauthorized surveillance. Any official or F.B.I. agent who employs a wiretap without a court order in a criminal case is subject to imprisonment and fine.

During 1969 and 1970, such Federal wiretaps were employed in only 309 cases. More than 900 arrests resulted, with some 500 persons being indicted—including several top leaders of organized crime.

The Government also employs wiretaps in counterintelligence activities involving national defense and internal security. The 1968 act left this delicate area to the inherent power of

the President.

Civil libertarians oppose the use of wiretapping in all cases, including its use against organized crime and foreign espionage. Since the 1968 act, however, the attack has focused on its use in internal security cases and some courts have distinguished these from foreign threats. The issue will be before the Supreme Court at the next term.

There can be legitimate concern whether a President should have this power with respect to internal "enemies." There is, at least in theory, the potential for abuse. This possibility must be balanced against the general public interest in preventing violence (e.g., bombing of the Capitol) and organized attempts to overthrow the Government.

One of the current myths is that the Department of Justice is usurping new powers. The truth is that wiretapping, as the most effective detection means, has been used against espionage and subversion for at least three decades under six Presidents.

There may have been a time when a valid distinction existed between external and internal threats. But such a distinction is now largely meaningless. The radical left, strongly led and with a growing base of support, is plotting violence and revolution. Its leaders visit and collaborate with foreign Communist enemies. Freedom can be lost as irrevocably from revolution as from foreign attack.

The question is often asked why, if prior court authorization to wiretap is required in ordinary criminal cases, it should not also be required in national security cases. In simplest terms the answer given by government is the need for secrecy.

Foreign powers, notably the Communist ones, conduct massive espionage and subversive operations against America. They are now aided by leftist radical organizations and their sympathizers in this country. Court-authorized wiretapping requires a prior showing of probable cause and the ultimate disclosure of sources. Public disclosure of this sensitive information would seriously handicap our counterespionage and counter-subversive operations.

As Attorney General John Mitchell has stated, prohibition of electronic surveillance would leave America as the "only nation in the world" unable to engage effectively in a wide area of counterintelligence activities necessary to national security.

Apparently as a part of a mindless campaign against the F.B.I. several nationally known political leaders have asserted their wires were tapped or that they were otherwise subject to surveillance. These charges received the widest publicity from the news media.

The fact is that not one of these



politicians has been able to prove his case. The Justice Department has branded the charges as false.

The outcry against wiretapping is a tempest in a teapot. There are 210 million Americans. There are only a few hundred wiretaps annually, and these are directed against people who seek to subvert our democratic form of government. Law-abiding citizens have nothing to fear.

In the general assault on law enforcement, charges of police repression have become a reflexive response by many civil libertarians as well as by radicals.

Examples are legion. Young people are being incited not to respect law officers but to regard them as "pigs." Black Panther literature, in the vilest language, urges the young to assault the police.

The New York Times and The Washington Post reported, as established fact, that twenty-eight Panthers had been gunned down by police since January, 1968. Ralph Abernathy attributed the death of Panther leaders to a "calculated design of genocide." Julian Bond charged that Panthers are being "decimated by police assassination arranged by the Federal police apparatus." Even Whitney Young referred to "nearly 30 Panthers murdered by law enforcement officials."

These charges, upon investigation (by The New Yorker magazine, among others), turned out to be erroneous. The fact is that two—possibly four at most—Panthers may have been shot by police without clear justification. Many of the twenty-eight Panthers were killed by other Panthers. There is no evidence whatever of a genocide conspiracy.

But the truth rarely overtakes falsehood—especially when the latter is disseminated by prestigious newspapers. Millions of young Americans, especially blacks, now believe these false charges. There is little wonder that assaults on police are steadily increasing.

The latest outcry against law enforcement was provoked by the mass arrests in Washington on May 3. Some 20,000 demonstrators, pursuant to carefully laid plans, sought to bring the Federal Government to a halt.

This was unlike prior demonstrations in Washington, as the avowed purpose of this one was to shut down the Government. The mob attempted to block main traffic arteries during

the early morning rush hours. Violence and property destruction were not insignificant. Some 39 policemen were injured. Indeed, Deputy Attorney General Kleindienst has revealed that the leaders of this attack held prior consultations with North Vietnamese officials in Stockholm.

Yet, because thousands were arrested, the American Civil Liberties Union and other predictable voices cried repression and brutality. The vast majority of those arrested were released, as evidence adequate to convict a particular individual is almost impossible to obtain in a faceless mob.

The alternative to making mass arrests was to surrender the Government to insurrectionaries. This would have set a precedent of incalculable danger. It also would have allowed a mob to deprive thousands of law-abiding Washington citizens of their rights to use the streets and to have access to their offices and homes.

Those who charge repression say that dissent is suppressed and free speech denied. Despite the wide credence given this assertion, it is sheer nonsense. There is no more open society in the world than America. No other press is as free. No other country accords its writers and artists such untrammelled freedom. No Solzhenitsyns are persecuted in America.

What other government would allow the Chicago Seven, while out on bail, to preach revolution across the land, vastly enriching themselves in the process?

What other country would tolerate in wartime the crescendo of criticism of government policy? Indeed, what other country would allow its citizens—including some political leaders—to negotiate privately with the North Vietnamese enemy?

Supreme Court decisions sanctify First Amendment freedoms. There is no prior restraint of any publication, except possibly in flagrant breaches of national security. There is virtually no recourse for libel, slander, or even incitement to revolution.

The public, including the young, are subject to filth and obscenities—openly published and exhibited.

The only abridgment of free speech in this country is not by government. Rather, it comes from the radical left—and their bemused supporters—who do not tolerate in others the rights they insist upon for themselves.



Prof. Herbert Marcuse of California, Marxist idol of the New Left, freely denounces "capitalist repression" and openly encourages revolution. At the same time he advocates denial of free speech to those who disagree with his "progressive" views.

It is common practice, especially on the campus, for leftists to shout down with obscenities any moderate or conservative speaker or physically to deny such speaker the rostrum.

A recurring theme in the repression syndrome is that Black Panthers and other dissidents cannot receive a fair trial.

The speciousness of this view has been demonstrated recently by acquittals in the New Haven and New York Panther cases—the very ones with respect to which the charge of repression was made by nationally known educators and ministers.

The rights of accused persons—without regard to race or belief—are more carefully safeguarded in America than in any other country. Under our system the accused is presumed to be innocent; the burden of proof lies on the state; guilt must be proved beyond reasonable doubt; public jury trial is guaranteed; and a guilty verdict must be unanimous.

In recent years, dramatic decisions of the Supreme Court have further strengthened the rights of accused persons and correspondingly limited the powers of law enforcement. There are no constitutional decisions in other countries comparable to those rendered in the cases of Escobedo and Miranda.

Rather than "repressive criminal justice," our system subordinates the safety of society to the rights of persons accused of crime. The need is for greater protection—not of criminals but of law-abiding citizens.

A corollary to the "fair trial" slander is the charge that radicals are framed and tried for political reasons. This is the worldwide Communist line with respect to Angela Davis. Many Americans repeat this charge against their own country, while raising no voice against standard practice of political and secret trials in Communist countries.

The radical left, with wide support from the customary camp followers, also is propagandizing the case of the Berrigans.

The guilt or innocence of these

people remains to be determined by juries of their peers in public trials. But the crimes charged are hardly "political." In the Davis case a judge and three others were brutally murdered. The Berrigans, one of whom stands convicted of destroying draft records, are charged with plots to bomb and kidnap.

Some trials in our country have been politicized—but not by government. A new technique, recently condemned by Chief Justice Warren Burger, has been developed by the Kunstlers and others who wish to discredit and destroy our system. Such counsel and defendants deliberately seek to turn courtrooms into Roman spectacles—disrupting the trial, shouting obscenities and threatening violence. It is they—not the system—who demean justice.

The answer to all of this was recently given by former California Chief Justice Roger J. Traynor, who said:

"It is irresponsible to echo such demagogic nonsense as the proposition that one group or another in this country cannot get a fair trial. . . . No country in the world has done more to insure fair trials."

America has its full share of problems. But significant or systematic government repression of civil liberties is not one of them.

The radical left—expert in such matters—knows the charge of repression is false. It is a cover for leftist-inspired violence and repression. It is also a propaganda line designed to undermine confidence in our free institutions, to brainwash the youth and ultimately to overthrow our democratic system.

It is unfortunate that so many non-radical Americans are taken in by this leftist line. They unwittingly weaken the very institutions of freedom they wish to sustain. They may hasten the day when the heel of repression is a reality—not from the sources now recklessly defamed but from whatever tyranny follows the overthrow of representative government.

This is the greatest danger to human liberty in America.

Lewis F. Powell, former president of the American Bar Association and one of President Nixon's nominees to the Supreme Court, wrote this article for the Aug. 1 editions of *The Times-Dispatch of Richmond, Va.*