

PRIVACY CAMPAIGN:

Eye on the Spies

By Carrol W. Cagle

Starting in late February, the 400,000 residents of the Albuquerque area were subjected to a month-long "media blitz" to jolt them into awareness of growing, sophisticated assaults against their privacy and other civil liberties.

Billboards, filled border-to-border with a single human eye, suddenly sprang up along heavily traveled freeways. Tiny eyes, one column by one inch, sometimes as many as a dozen in each edition, stared out at readers of the two Albuquerque daily newspapers.

Bizarre one-minute "spots" cropped up frequently on prime-time television, between familiar ads for commercial products.

In one spot the scene opened with school children playing in a park. In slow motion, a blond little girl ran happily toward the camera—closer, closer, until the action froze and the color changed to black and white. The little girl stared blankly forward in a prisoner-like pose with a social security number on a placard around her neck.

In addition, the New Mexico news media were filled with reports of the local appearance, nearly every day, of nationally recognized authorities on such subjects as law, education, and psychology, speaking on invasions of privacy.

Consciousness

The parade of speakers and the "saturation media" campaign were all part of a carefully orchestrated program, more than a year in the making, of the New Mexico Civil Liberties Union. It was designed to raise the level of consciousness among ordinary citizens about civil liberties issues—especially ever-growing, ever-more-subtle threats brought about by sophisticated misuse of computers and other technology.

The program seems to have worked. To measure the effectiveness of their campaign, NMCLU commissioned a prior poll by University of New Mexico polling experts; it showed that 83 per cent of Albuquerqueans didn't think "invasion of privacy" was a very important issue. But after the media blitz, pollsters found that figure had changed dramatically: 52.5 per cent believed privacy was important and that political and legal steps should be taken to protect it.

NMCLU is now planning a follow-up campaign to adjudicate abuses, keep the issues in the public eye, and influence public policy. The project will:

- Monitor programs of police, state and federal bureaucracies, and private businesses which infringe upon or endanger privacy.

- Stimulate investigative journalistic reporting of civil liberties issues.

- Serve as a center for information and action programs, and act as a consultant to interested parties.

- Serve as a clearinghouse for speaking engagements and various publications.

- Launch lobbying efforts aimed at the state legislature and other policy-making bodies.

Control

The idea for the project sprang up in January 1973 among members of the Institute for Regional Education, a public-interest organization in Santa Fe. They saw the emergence of a theme, the "technology of control," to describe an entire range of seemingly unrelated problems including computer billing hassles, access to credit bureau files, use of "behavior modification" drugs on "problem children" and prisoners, insensitive bureaucracies, and more.

But the question was how to get the general, apolitical public aware of these dangers and to realize that indeed there was a common theme of "control" present in all of them, already or potentially affecting their lives adversely.

"We didn't want to talk to just our-

selves," said Godfrey Reggio, one of the institute officials. "We wanted something that would relate to the experiences of a large group of people."

Dan Liebhsen, one of Reggio's colleagues, added: "We've tried to take the privacy issue and move a step beyond it. What's the purpose of the Bill of Rights? It's to guard against control, whether it be by a king or a computer or a bureaucracy."

The institute raised cash, succeeded in getting thousands of dollars more in donated technical services, and produced the highly professional films and other media programs for the campaign. NMCLU agreed to sponsor the campaign, and to be active in follow-up litigation and other work.

While the campaign originated in and was confined to New Mexico, other states have expressed an interest in conducting similar campaigns—especially if the campaign really does have a long-term impact on the level of citizen awareness of growing civil liberties threats.

The bulk of the media campaign was oriented toward simply raising questions—making people wonder, as one organizer said, "just what in the hell is going on." Those eyes peered out at every newspaper reader, at every commuter. People relaxing in front of the television at day's end were jolted into uneasy curiosity.

Hot Line

Toward the end of the month, additional spots revealed the purposes of the campaign. A comprehensive booklet, outlining in detail the "technology of control," was inserted in the Sunday *Albuquerque Journal* and a toll-free "hot line" was set up and advertised thoroughly on t.v. and radio—to receive calls from viewers about their own problems.

The "hot line" center, staffed by NMCLU volunteers, was busy from the start. Dozens of calls came in with complaints ranging from improper use of military records and social security numbers, to abuse of credit bureau and bank data, to use of the Albuquerque Police Department's "spy in the sky" surveillance airplane.

One elderly couple reported that they were sitting in their backyard in the late evening when the plane's spotlight hit them, stayed on them and intensified while the plane circled above. "It scared the world out of us," the man reported. "It reminded us of George Orwell's *1984*."

A woman complained that the plane is a problem in daytime, too. She said she couldn't sunbathe on her roof any more.

That the media campaign reached its audience, at least partly, was evident when one man, working in his backyard garden and incensed by the plane's spotlight, raced into his house, got a can of spray paint, and painted a huge eye on his roof to stare back at the plane. (He included Nixon's social security number.)

A woman working in a department store telephoned to say that all employees, upon reporting for work, must empty their pockets and purses and carry personal belongings in see-through plastic bags. It's supposedly an anti-theft measure. The woman, referring to the practice as "intimidating" and "degrading," said employees who protest are fired, and that they're afraid of losing their jobs.

Others called to protest that the Mountain Bell Telephone Company charges a substantially higher deposit fee for those who refuse to reveal their social security numbers on their applications for service.

One woman, herself employed by an Albuquerque law enforcement agency, reported that a credit investigator had been talking to her neighbors to ascertain whether her husband was alive. She called the credit company and found that it would not reveal the name of the in-



Photo by Nancy Hollander

Nixon's social security number

urance company for which it was doing the checking, or the purpose of the inquiries. Her husband, suffering from a severe heart condition, was greatly disturbed by the investigation. "Why didn't they just call me?" he demanded. "I could've told them I was alive."

A career officer in the Air Force called in general support of the campaign. "I've been a number all my life," he said. "I'm not going to leave the service just to become a number again."

Follow-Up

Hundreds of calls came in to the "hot line" center by the end of the campaign, and when it was discontinued, other calls continued to come in to the NMCLU office. NMCLU is now considering what reports may be useful for court actions.

The potential for a political coalition among ideological adversaries was demonstrated at the conclusion of the media campaign.

Appearing at a University of New Mexico rally, alongside the self-styled

"alternative culture" activists who originated the campaign, was Rep. Barry Goldwater, Jr. of California. Goldwater, who has introduced federal legislation to limit use of social security numbers and who is sponsoring HEW's package of computer control legislation in the House, told several hundred listeners:

"Centralized control of information, the flow of knowledge and the processes of education have the effect of denying freedom. They allow only those views... which are held by the directors of the centers of control..."

Goldwater was vigorously applauded by the student audience when he said:

"Let us insert private rights into the programs of the programmers. Let us restore human dignity as the cardinal principle rather than worship the gods of efficiency."

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