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Activism and Terrorism

Timothy Zick

William & Mary Law School, tzick@wm.edu

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Posted By [Timothy Zick](#) On October 9, 2008 @ 12:35 pm In [Civil Rights](#) | [2 Comments](#)

Dan [points out](#) ^[1] below that the NSA is dealing with a scandal relating to its surveillance activities. The NSA is not alone. The Maryland State Police have [confessed error](#) ^[2] in listing 53 activists as "terrorists" in state and federal police databases. The designation occurred following months of covert surveillance of the individuals and their anti-war and anti-death penalty groups. The officers involved face no internal sanctions or other discipline, although new "guidelines" for domestic surveillance are apparently in the works.

The explanation for the "mistake" is that officers were simply "filling in a database," were working for a "technology challenged" agency, and did not *really* consider those listed to be "terrorists." These rather weak excuses will be of little consequence to those placed in the database, whose groups were infiltrated and investigated by authorities as if they were planning terrorist activity. In one sense, we have reached a point at which the label "terrorist" is so overused and even abused (e.g., in the current presidential contest) as to lose its true meaning. On the other hand, the label itself can be quite damaging — especially when it is the state doing the labeling. Designating and treating a person or group as a "terrorist" can result in significant symbolic, expressive, and other harms.

Of a more general concern is the trend toward treating political activism in this country as a form of domestic terrorism. Like Dan in the case of the NSA, I am not at all surprised by the Maryland events. Authorities now routinely prepare for and police even peaceful and lawful acts by dissenting groups as possible terrorist threats. Protesters and activists are not enemies of the state. At this point, however, there have been enough "mistakes" like those in Maryland to strongly suggest that authorities take this view. Our country does have real enemies. Spending fourteen months chasing and surveilling political activists seems like a very poor allocation of resources.

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URL to article:

http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2008/10/activism_and_te_1.html

URLs in this post:

[1] points out:

http://www.concurringopinions.com/archives/2008/10/nsa_surveillanc_8.html#comments

[2] confessed error: <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/news.aspx?id=20664>

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