

# UNDERMINING AND SPYING ON AMERICA?

An upcoming forum looks at how the Patriot Act affects minorities by Meg Daly

**T**o deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, to enhance law enforcement investigatory tools, and for other purposes." This is the full title of what is commonly known as the USA Patriot Act. (The USA, in this case, stands for "Uniting and Strengthening America.") Passed in October 2001 amid a flurry of dramatic—and some say hasty—actions taken in the wake of 9/11, the legislation vastly increased the U.S. government's surveillance powers and eroded important checks and balances, ostensibly in the name of fighting terrorism.

Now in the pipeline is "Patriot Act II," draft legislation from the Justice Department that would grant additional sweeping surveillance powers to the government. An upcoming forum sponsored by the Lesbian Community Project and others will look at how queers and other minorities are affected by the current law, and what to fear about the proposed additional legislation.

"I think we are moving dangerously away from freedom of speech and expression," said Linda Besant, a member of the Lesbian Community Project and a co-organizer of the forum. "I feel a need to be actively informed."

Besant and fellow LCP member Alyson Bolles have been instrumental in planning the forum, which will feature human rights activist Kathleen Sadaat, civil liberties expert Carolyn Long, Portland State University virtual reference coordinator Kim Willson-St. Clair and U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore.

Bolles says she and Besant came up with the idea for the discussion when they attended a similar forum in Vancouver, Wash. "The act was passed and is being implemented, but people still don't understand it. The more information we have about the Patriot Act, the better we will be able to defend our civil liberties."

Bolles and Besant teamed up with members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom to envision the discussion, thereby addressing two goals of LCP's long-range planning—to hold a series of forums on the current political climate and to work in coalition with other groups.

"It's been an honor to work with WILPF," Besant says. "They're an organization with a long history of women working for peace and justice."

Bolles, who is also a member of WILPF, adds: "We want to learn more about what our communities want. We want to get people talking and taking action."

The forum presenters will discuss how the Patriot Act has changed laws governing issues such as privacy protections and surveillance thresholds. They will also address what the legislation means for citizens who protest or "look suspicious" as well as the effect on non-U.S. citizens residing here. Long has spoken about the act's effect on library users, Blumenauer has been a staunch opponent of the act since its early days, and Sadaat is versed in the law's effect on queers.

One of the things that motivated Bolles to hold this forum is her concern about the length and complexity of the act. She doesn't feel the media have done an accurate job of informing citizens and providing adequate analysis. "It's like they're trying to keep us ignorant," she says.

Besant sees an additional reason for people to be well versed about the act: misinformation. "It's important that we not attribute things to the Patriot Act that aren't part of it," she says, noting that misinformed activism can weaken dissent. "The forum is a way to get accurate information."

"Anybody whose lifestyle or views are different from the direction the country is going are impacted," Besant says. "I'm concerned that some of the provisions of the act will be applied to people who are doing legitimate activities that have nothing to do with security—like protesting."

The American Civil Liberties Union filed the first legal challenge to the act July 30, asserting that it violates constitutional protections against unreasonable searches and seizures as well as the rights to freedom of speech and association. Among the six plaintiff groups is the Islamic Center of Portland, or Masjed As-Saber, which operates a mosque and school in the Rose City.

According to the ACLU, the legislation created a new crime of "domestic terrorism": "The Patriot Act transforms protesters into

terrorists if they engage in conduct that 'involves acts dangerous to human life' to 'influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion.'"

"How long will it be," the ACLU asks, "before an ambitious or politically motivated prosecutor uses the statute to charge members of controversial activist groups like Operation Rescue or Greenpeace with terrorism?"

Queers have particular reason for concern about the Patriot Act's implications, Bolles says. "Because many queers are politically active in securing our civil rights, we could be targeted for being activists. People are being imprisoned without charge, and that could impact other protesters."

Bolles is also worried about how the law is affecting international students. "I think it's a way of targeting minorities," she says of the Patriot Act's provisions that allow the government to request library records without the patron being informed.

Indeed, librarians have been some of the most vocal opponents to the new law. "Librarians are awesome," Bolles says. "I think people might be surprised to learn how active librarian organizations are in protecting patrons' privacy rights."

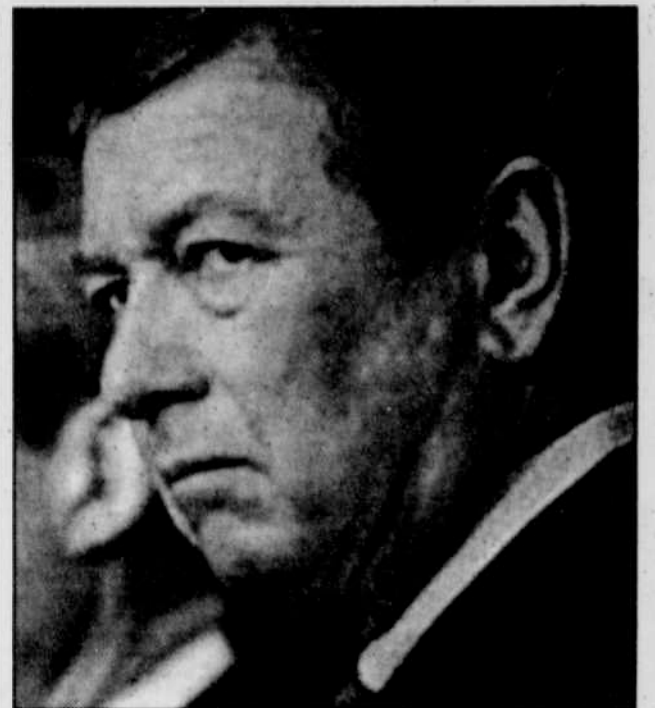
Willson-St. Clair, who works at PSU's Millar Library, adds: "The library profession has worked diligently not to marginalize populations. We are considered a safe space."

But that safe space is being eroded by the Patriot Act. Willson-St. Clair and others are working hard to protect patrons' privacy as best they can. "We are conducting privacy audits to make sure we know where every bit of information is that we have stored about a patron—and that we keep only what is timely and pertinent."

Willson-St. Clair worries that her queer patrons could be targeted for their reading habits. "Profiling is what it is," she says. She encourages citizens to support the Freedom to Read Act now before Congress.

Librarians are not alone in fighting invasion of privacy. The ACLU has not been shy about calling many provisions of the Patriot Act unconstitutional.

Even more alarm has been raised about "Patriot Act II." According to the ACLU, "the government would no longer be required to disclose the identity of anyone, even an American citizen, detained in connection with a terror



**U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft wants Congress to grant additional sweeping surveillance powers to the government**

investigation—until criminal charges are filed, no matter how long that takes."

The ACLU also notes that under the proposed law, "individuals engaged in civil disobedience could risk losing citizenship; their organization could be subject to wiretapping and asset seizure."

These sorts of strictures are frightening to Besant. "I'm a liberal on every front," she says. "I'm worried that soon being a liberal won't be OK on any front."

Bolles adds: "We need to do further organizing, and this forum is one step in many. I'm hoping people who haven't been involved in politics will come to the forum and will find ways to participate in civil rights activism, if that's what they choose to do."

Willson-St. Clair is more blunt: "To become politically active is the best thing anyone in this country can do if they are interested in their freedom to read and their freedom of thought and speech." □

A forum on THE UNITING AND STRENGTHENING AMERICA PATRIOT ACT AND THOSE IN THE MINORITY will start at 7:30 p.m. Aug. 5 in the ballroom on the second floor of Portland State University's Smith Memorial Center, 1825 S.W. Broadway. A \$2-\$4 donation is requested. For more information call 503-227-0605.

MEG DALY is a Portland free-lance writer.

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