

The Threat from Within

Washington Newsletter, No.666, May 2002

FRIENDS COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL LEGISLATION

Through much of the Cold War, many people in the U.S., including policy-makers, worried about the violent overthrow of the U.S. government by communists bent on a new world order. These fears led both to domestic repression and to extraordinary military buildups.

In the end, the U.S. democracy and capitalist economy outlived any threat that communism may have posed. The Cold War-era damage to U.S. society and citizens came not from without the U.S., nor from Fifth Columnists within the U.S., but rather from forces unleashed through the words and actions of elected officials. Some lives were destroyed by allegations of communist leanings. Others were damaged or destroyed by nuclear fallout or wastes, a direct consequence of the nuclear arms race.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain, communism ceased to be the great threat. Since September 11, terrorism has been given that role.

Violent acts such as occurred on September 11 must be addressed. However, it is not those acts that pose the greatest threat to U.S. society. Rather, the threat will come and is already coming from elected officials carrying out their lawful duties.

The events of September 11 did not destroy the Bill of Rights. But the USA-Patriot Act and the continuing maneuvers of the Department of Justice under Attorney General Ashcroft threaten to turn the U.S. into a permanent security state.

The events of September 11, as destructive as they were, did not constitute an act of war directed against the U.S. by another nation. Yet, the Administration responded (with overwhelming congressional blessing) by making war on Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in an ill-conceived effort to stamp out terrorism.

The events of September 11 did not involve nuclear or biological weapons, though the events did raise legitimate concerns about possible future use of such weapons. But the Administration, with help from many in Congress, is turning the U.S. away from international cooperation in arms control and disarmament that could reduce such threats. U.S. and global security are diminished as a result.

The events of September 11 did not direct the U.S. to increase its reliance on the military. It is the Administration and its congressional allies that have raised military spending to new heights and that are subtly shifting responsibilities (such as diplomacy and nation-building) from civil society to military control.

The events of September 11 did not damage the constitutional system of checks and balances nor public accountability. But constitutional protections and democratic government are under great threat from an Administration that seeks to aggrandize power and from members of Congress who are both reluctant to exercise legitimate oversight and eager to strip the courts of their responsibility for oversight.

The U.S. is poised at a Rubicon and the world with it. Those in U.S. government who press to cross the river are, like Caesar, committed to being victorious. But Caesar recognized that failure to conquer would mean death, for himself and all those under his leadership. Do U.S. leaders who are so eager for U.S. military domination recognize all that is at stake?

It is not too late to change course. The U.S. does not have to exercise military domination of the world. U.S. civil society and democratic government do not have to be sacrificed. The world does not have to face the nightmare of global war with weapons of mass destruction.

The U.S., through strong congressional action, can take the path of multilateral cooperation and treaties to prevent or deal with violence. Congress can authorize and fund strong national policy for the peaceful prevention of deadly conflict. Congress can reassert its legitimate oversight of agencies responsible for domestic security. Congress, through the power of the purse, can block the development of new nuclear weapons.

The greatest threat to the continued existence of a free and democratic U.S. will not come from al Qaeda or Saddam Hussein. Rather, it will come from U.S. leaders who are willing to sacrifice those values to achieve other goals.

Reprinted from the *Washington Newsletter*, No.666, May 2002,
published by the Friends Committee on National Legislation.