

About the USA PATRIOT ACT

Background. Six weeks after 9/11, a bill was passed which may forever alter the political climate in America. Still reeling from the shock of 9/11, a panicked Congress, ejected from their offices by the anthrax scare and in disarray, adopted a 342-page body of provisions hurriedly brought forth from the wings and dusted off by Attorney General John Ashcroft. Most congress people did not read the document before passing it.

This bill was given the acronym USA PATRIOT Act. Scaffolding onto Clinton's Anti-Terrorist bill of 1996 - the response to the first World Trade Center bombing and to the attack on the Oklahoma City Federal Building - the USA PATRIOT Act goes much further and penetrates far more deeply than anything experienced by our country in its recent history in its attempt to provide the federal government with vast powers to incarcerate, spy upon, and suppress those it deems suspect, both citizen and alien.

Homeland Security Act. The USA PATRIOT Act works in tandem with the Homeland Security Act, which reduces our privacy, increases government secrecy and power, and strengthens government protection of special interests.

"Patriot Act II," recently leaked but not yet before Congress, would tighten the provisions of the USA PATRIOT Act and even go so far as to strip native-born citizens of their citizenship if the attorney general decided they had supported an organization that the government labeled terrorist.

Immigrants targeted first. The worst provisions of the USA PATRIOT Act have up to now been aimed at immigrants in the form of detention without due process. Because the act has been used on citizens only in isolated incidents, the media has not taken much notice and there has been relatively little public outcry.

Foundation laid. The legal foundation, however, has now been established for future and severe curtailments of everyone's rights to due process, privacy, and freedom of speech, guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. We must decide whether we will ignore the erosion of our civil liberties until one day we realize with a jolt - too late - that the balance has been tipped and we are no longer the "land of the free."

Fundamental question. The USA PATRIOT Act raises a fundamental question for all Americans: just how far are we willing to go to fight terrorism? Certain things are accepted as necessary by all - for example, searches while boarding a plane. Most would agree that searches and spying are justified in cases where evidence indicates suspicious behavior. **But what if that evidence is missing?** What if someone is targeted solely because of his ethnicity or because he has spoken out in an unpopular way? What if someone tipped off the police that his neighbor is acting "suspiciously"?

How wide a net shall we cast to catch those who threaten us? How many innocent people are we willing to sacrifice on the altar of anti-terrorism? If we can no longer distinguish ourselves from countries that we label police states, are we losing our historic identity as Americans?

History of crackdowns. Throughout our history there have often been groups that the government at the time considered a threat - Japanese-Americans in World War II after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Communists in the McCarthy era and after, labor unions in the 20s and 30s, anti-war activists in the 60s. Today with the benefit of hindsight, many of us look back on past transgressions of first amendment freedoms of speech, fourth amendment rights to privacy, or fifth and fourteenth amendment rights to due process during Japanese internment or McCarthyism, the Palmer Raids or the COINTELPRO misinformation campaign, as tragic and mistaken episodes in American history and regard them with shame. Can we learn from our history?

Is it possible we are making the same mistake today?