

## Who's Watching the Watch List? By John Graham

Heading for Oakland from Seattle to see my grandkids, the Alaska Airlines check-in machine refused to give me a boarding pass. Directed to the ticket counter, I gave the agent my driver's license and watched her punch keys at her computer.

Frowning, she told me that my name was on the national terrorist No-Fly Watch List and that I had to be specially cleared to board a plane. Any plane. Then she disappeared with my license for 10 minutes, returning with a boarding pass and a written notice from the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) confirming that my name was on a list of persons "who posed, or were suspected of posing, a threat to civil aviation or national security."

No one could tell me more than that. The computer was certain.

Back home in Seattle, I called the TSA's 800 number, where I rode a merry-go-round of pleasant recorded voices until I gave up. Turning to the TSA web site, I downloaded a Passenger Identity Verification form that would assist the TSA in "assessing" my situation if I sent it in with a package of certified documents attesting to who I was.

I collected all this stuff and sent it in. Another 20 minutes on the phone to the TSA uncovered no live human being at all, let alone one who would tell me what I'd presumably done to get on The List. Searching my mind for possible reasons, I've been more and more puzzled. I used to work on national security issues for the State Department and I know how dangerous our country's opponents can be. To the dismay of many of my more progressive friends, I've given the feds the benefit of the doubt on homeland security. I tend to dismiss conspiracy theories as nonsense and I take my shoes off for the airport screeners with a smile.

I'm embarrassed that it took my own ox being gored for me to see the threat posed by the Administration's current restricting of civil liberties. I'm being accused of a serious — even treasonous — criminal intent by a faceless bureaucracy, with no opportunity (that I can find) to refute any errors or false charges. My ability to earn a living is threatened; I speak on civic action and leadership all over the world, including recently at the US Air Force Academy. Plane travel is key to my livelihood.

According to a recent MSNBC piece, thousands of Americans are having similar experiences. And this is not Chile under Pinochet. It's America. My country and yours.

With no real information to go on, I'm left to guess why this is happening to me. The easiest and most comforting guess is that it's all a mistake (a possibility the TSA form, to its credit, allows). But how? I'm a 63-year-old guy with an Anglo-Saxon name. I once held a Top Secret Umbra clearance (don't ask what it is but it meant the FBI vetted me up the whazoo for months). And since I left the government in 1980, my life has been an open book. It shouldn't be hard for the government to figure out that I'm not a menace to my country.

If they do think that, I can't see how. Since 1983 I've helped lead the Giraffe Heroes Project, a nonprofit that moves people to stick their necks out for the common good. In the tradition of Gandhi, King and Mandela, that can include challenging public policies people think are

unjust. In 1990, the Project's founder and I were honored as "Points of Light" by the first President Bush for our work in fostering the health of this democracy. I've just written a book about activating citizens to get to work on whatever problems they care about, instead of sitting around complaining.

I'm also engaged in international peacemaking, working with an organization with a distinguished 60-year record of success in places ranging from post-war Europe to Africa. Peacemakers must talk to all sides, so over the years I've met with Cambodians, Sudanese, Palestinians, Israelis and many others. You can't convince people to move toward peaceful solutions unless you understand who they are.

As I said, I'm not into conspiracy theories. But I can't ignore this administration's efforts to purge and punish dissenters and opponents. Look, for example, at current efforts to cleanse PBS and NPR of "anti-administration" news. But I'm not Bill Moyers and the Giraffe Heroes Project is not PBS. We're a small operation working quietly to promote real citizenship.

Whether it's a mistake or somebody with the power to hassle me really thinks I am a threat, the stark absence of due process is unsettling. The worst of it is that being put on a list of America's enemies seems to be permanent. The TSA form states:

'The TSA clearance process will not remove a name from the Watch Lists. Instead this process distinguishes passengers from persons who are in fact on the Watch Lists by placing their names and identifying information in a cleared portion of the Lists.'

Which may or may not, the form continues, reduce the airport hassles. Huh?

My name is on a list of real and suspected enemies of the state and I can't find out what I'm accused of or why, let alone defend myself. And I'm guilty, says my government, not just until proven innocent or a victim of mistaken identity— but forever.

Sure, 9/11 changed a lot. Tougher internal security measures (like thorough screenings at airports and boundary crossings) are a dismal necessity. But, in protecting ourselves, we can't allow our leaders to continue to create a climate of fear and mistrust, to destroy our civil liberties and, in so doing, to change who we are as a nation. What a victory that would be for our enemies, and what a betrayal of real patriots and so many in the wider world who still remember this country as a source of inspiration and hope.

I don't think it's like Germany in 1936—but, look at Germany in 1930. Primed by National Socialist propaganda to stay fearful and angry, Germans in droves refused to see the right's extreme views and actions as a threat to their liberties.

And don't forget that frog. You know that frog. Dropped into a pot of boiling water, he jumps out to safety. But put him into a pot of cold water over a steady flame, he won't realize the danger until it's too late to jump.

So how hot does the water have to get? When the feds can rifle through your library reading list? When they can intimidate journalists? When a government agency can keep you off airplanes without giving you a reason? When there's not even a pretense of due process? We're

not talking about prisoners at Guantanamo; this is you and me. Well, after last week, it sure as hell is me and it could be you, next.

Oh, yes —Washington State just refused to renew my driver's license online, a privilege given others. I had to wait in line at the DMV before a computer decided I could drive home. This conspiracy theory debunker smells a connection to the Watch List.

I'm mobilizing everything I've got to challenge the government on this issue, in a country that I love and have served. Whatever your politics, it's your fight too. Yes, there needs to be a list of the bad guys, coordinated among the security agencies with a need-to-know. But we must demand that the government make public its criteria for putting people on this list—and those reasons can't include constitutionally protected dissent from government policies.

The feds can't be allowed to throw names on the list without first doing simple checks for mistaken identity. And no one's name should be added to the list, or kept on it, without a formal, open explanation of charges and the opportunity to challenge and disprove them. This assault on civil liberties must not stand—not for me, not for anybody.