

"In 1990 Poindexter was convicted for the felonies of conspiracy and lying to Congress and obstructing congressional inquiries. . . . The facts of Poindexter's lying and gutting of the Constitution were never in dispute . . . Now the Bush administration, as if to punctuate its assault on civil liberties under the cover of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, has appointed Poindexter to figure out how to assemble and use all the data one could possibly gather on Americans. The stated reason is to spot and stop terrorist activity. By appointing Poindexter, the administration justifies fears that it will treat our privacy in the cavalier way that Poindexter once treated the law."

## **Who's watching the watchers?**

**by Derrick Z. Jackson**

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THIS WEEK the Pentagon and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld defended the Total Information Awareness project from mounting criticism from civil libertarians. The project is intended to research a system that could give police and intelligence agencies access to virtually all your personal transactions -- financial, education, travel, medical, transportation, housing, and even veterinary.

On its Web page, the Information Awareness Office considers someone's gait to be vital information. Rumsfeld and the military swear this is solely in the service of finding terrorists before they can strike. "The hype and alarm approach is a disservice to the public," Rumsfeld said.

The big clue that the hype and alarm are not a disservice is right there on the agency's Web page in the resume of its director, John Poindexter. On the part of the resume that covers 1983-86, his years as deputy national security adviser and national security adviser to President Reagan, it states:

"As national security adviser, Vice Admiral Poindexter was responsible for providing recommendations to the president on national security, foreign policy, and defense policy. He was directly involved in implementing the president's policies on a strong defense, freedom, and democracy around the world, human rights, world hunger, economic military assistance, combating terrorism, and arms control. Major events in which he played a significant role included: Strategic Defense Initiative, Grenada Rescue Operation, Achille Lauro incident, Libyan operation to respond to terrorist attacks, Reykjavik Summit with Soviets, peaceful transition of government in Philippines, support for the democratic resistance in Nicaragua, and an attempt to begin rationalization of US relationship with strategically important Iran."

Even as Poindexter wants your gait, he has virtually changed his own identity. On human rights, when the House approved economic sanctions in 1986 against the brutal apartheid regime in South Africa, Poindexter was the man who announced that the Reagan administration had "grave misgivings and strong opposition" to sanctions, in effect maintaining economic support of the regime. On world hunger, you can find more on the record from Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen than you can find by Poindexter on Ethiopia or any other locale of starvation.



What Poindexter is most remembered for is his lead role in the Iran-contra scandal -- the secret and illegal funneling of profits from arms sales to Iran to mercenary rebels fighting the leftist government in Nicaragua. Poindexter, along with Oliver North, lied to Congress, which had barred US aid to the contras, and destroyed documents about the operation. Poindexter knew so thoroughly how explosive his activities were that he "made a very deliberate decision not to ask the president so that I could insulate him from the decision and provide some future deniability for the president if it ever leaked out."

In 1990 Poindexter was convicted for the felonies of conspiracy and lying to Congress and obstructing congressional inquiries. The conviction was overturned in 1991 because an appellate court ruled that too much of the testimony Poindexter had given before Congress under the protection of immunity had been used, directly or indirectly, against him.

The facts of Poindexter's lying and gutting of the Constitution were never in dispute, not when he defiantly told the world, "The buck stops here with me."

Now the Bush administration, as if to punctuate its assault on civil liberties under the cover of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, has appointed Poindexter to figure out how to assemble and use all the data one could possibly gather on Americans. The stated reason is to spot and stop terrorist activity. By appointing Poindexter, the administration justifies fears that it will treat our privacy in the cavalier way that Poindexter once treated the law.

At best, a gargantuan database will make the government a wasteful busybody on the most benign of your transactions. At worst, if Americans know *en masse* that their unauthorized biographies are lurking in a Pentagon database, there is no telling what the effect will be on free speech, as people fear being tagged as un-American by surveillance officials who wake up on the wrong side of the bed. Too many would-be James Bonds in a computer room might blow up too many lives.

The fact that Poindexter has already admitted keeping knowledge of illegal activities from the president should automatically disqualify him from having anything to do with the privacy of Americans. The fact that the White House cannot talk straight about his appointment should make Americans demand that the project be scrapped until secrecy becomes an open debate.

Last week a reporter asked White House deputy spokesman Scott McClellan if President Bush publicly supports Poindexter's program. All McClellan said was: "I've seen the reports, but I think you need to talk to the Pentagon. That is a question related to something that the Pentagon may be looking at, so I would refer you to the Pentagon."

The obfuscation so well associated with Poindexter has begun. With him in charge of Total Information Awareness, you can be sure you will be the last to know if the government is breaking the law.

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