Let's Punish Criminals, Not Snoop on Private Citizens

by Phyllis Schlafly *May 11, 1995*

Are the Republicans in Congress going to roll over and let the Clinton Administration use the Oklahoma City tragedy as an excuse to establish a federal police state with unprecedented power to spy on and harass law-abiding citizens? President Clinton has seized on the Oklahoma City bombing as a vehicle to lift his Administration out of the public opinion-poll doldrums and give it new life.

First, Clinton directed his verbal attacks against talk radio hosts. Now he is demanding bipartisan support for a long list of proposals, supposedly to combat terrorism, but which would invade the privacy of law-abiding citizens while doing nothing to prevent such outrages as happened in Oklahoma City.

Clinton says we will still have our First Amendment rights. Maybe we will be able to speak, but Janet Reno's agents will be able to listen in on our private conversations, and that certainly will have a chilling effect on free speech.

Under present law, federal agents may obtain a wiretap for only a relatively short list of serious crimes such as drug trafficking. Clinton is now demanding permission for federal agents to obtain a wiretap to investigate any suspected federal felony.

If you thought that federal felonies are primarily national crimes such as the assassination of a President, the hijacking of an airplane, or transporting a kidnapped person across state lines, you are living in the past. Experts estimate that there are some 1,300 federal felonies, including private property offenses under the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts which most people don't even realize are crimes.

Clinton and Janet Reno want to be able to wiretap in order to "investigate" any of those 1,300 federal crimes, and the person wiretapped does not even have to be the one suspected of committing a felony. Clinton also wants to forbid suppression of surveillance evidence in court unless investigators acted in "bad faith," whatever that means.

The Clinton Administration has been planning this massive spy operation for some time. This became clear last year during the passage of the Digital Telephony Act.

With telephone lines rapidly converting to digital signals, the old wiretap method of alligator clips doesn't work except on the portion of your phone call between your house and the local switch. The Clinton Administration got Congress to include a provision in the Digital Telephony Act forcing telephone companies to install special equipment that will enable the feds to identify and listen to digital phone calls.

The phone companies balked at the high cost of installing the necessary equipment.

So Congress just included authorization for the taxpayers to pay for this equipment, but did not appropriate any funds.

Now, Clinton is using the Oklahoma bombing as an excuse to induce Congress to appropriate $500,000,000 to pay for the installation of digital wiretap equipment. This would, in effect, repeal the Fourth Amendment's prohibition against "unreasonable searches and seizures," and enable Janet Reno to wiretap the phone conversations of ordinary Americans under the excuse that she is investigating some federal crime somewhere (such as a neighbor violating a "wetlands" regulation).

It's not surprising that Clinton wants the power to listen in on your telephone conversations. After all, the Clinton health care bill (developed by Hillary's task force in secret, in defiance of the law and of a court order to make its deliberations public) included a plan to set up a computer database to which your doctor would have been required to report all medical treatment and on which the feds could track everyone's medical history.

Clinton is pushing other privacy-invading proposals. He wants to give Janet Reno's agents the power to force banks and credit card companies to turn over their records on individuals. He wants to give Janet Reno's agents the power to force hotels, motels, airlines and bus companies to tum over their records about individuals.

Clinton wants to set up a new federal interagency domestic-counter-terrorism center and hire 1,000 new federal agents. That would simply expand Janet Reno's power, whose department was responsible for the killing of Mrs. Randy Weaver in Idaho and the tragedy of Waco.

Clinton wants to give Janet Reno new powers to investigate groups without any evidence of a criminal act or plot. He even wants to bring back the practices of the Reconstruction era when U.S. armed forces enforced civilian law in post-Civil War South.

Clinton's contempt for the Constitution was further illustrated by his intemperate reaction to the Supreme Court's *Lopez* decision, which limited Congress's power to govern local schools. Clinton said he is asking Janet Reno to find a way to "reverse the practical impact of the Court's decision."

Tell your Congressman to cool it. We need thorough Congressional investigations of Oklahoma City, of suspect Timothy McVeigh's experience in the Gulf War, and of the Weaver and Waco deaths. We need to prosecute criminals. But we don't want to give Janet Reno or the Clinton Administration one iota of additional power.