

US states are spying on political activists and classifying them as terrorists in order to stifle protest.

Two recent events demonstrate how easy it is for the government to dilute words and their meanings to close off opposition and dissent. Last week, the Maryland state police disclosed that 53 nonviolent anti-war and anti-death penalty activists were tracked for 14 months in 2005 and 2006 under the state's terrorism surveillance programme, and that their names had been added to the state's and the National Security Agency's database.

Who are these sinister terrorists? Two of the activists caught in the Maryland dragnet are Carol Gilbert and Ardeth Platte, Dominican nuns in the Roman Catholic Church who did indeed break the law in acts of civil disobedience. On October 2, 2002, in response to the first anniversary of the war in Afghanistan, they broke into a missile silo in northeastern Colorado and painted bloody crosses on it.

Understanding that acts of civil disobedience carry grave consequences, Gilbert and Platte paid a hefty price for their protest: they went to prison. Gilbert received 30 months in a federal penitentiary while Platte was sentenced to 41 months for injuring government property and obstructing national defence. The nuns no doubt agree with Thoreau's famous saying: "Under a government which imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison."

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