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EDITORIALS

Our own little police state

All crimes covered by anti-terror bill are already ... well, crimes

It's not enough, apparently, that the federal government has already enacted one omnibus "anti-terrorism" bill in the wake of Sept. 11 — a massive measure complete with constitutionally challenged provisions to facilitate additional snooping on Americans' phone calls, e-mails, home computers — even transactions as innocuous as pawing an engagement ring or buying a supermarket money order.

No, our frightfully tenuous remaining "guarantees" of due process and privacy under the USA Patriot Act apparently still present too many inconveniences for law enforcement — even though no one has ever explained or even been asked how all these new powers could possibly have prevented the terrible events of Sept. 11, even had they been in place at the time.

So, not to be left out of the excitement, Clark County Sheriff Bill Young and Nevada Assembly Speaker Richard Perkins argue the federal measures aren't enough; little Nevada needs its own anti-terror legislation. After all, Sheriff Young pointed out Wednesday, five of the Sept. 11 hijackers had previously visited Las Vegas.

Assemblyman Perkins is busily amending his law as he goes along.

Yowzers! And if the proposed Perkins Act had been in effect at that time, it would have changed things ... how?

Terrorism is defined, in Assemblyman Perkins' new Assembly Bill 250, as any act that serves to "intimidate or coerce a civilian population" or "disrupt, affect or influence the conduct or policy of a government entity."

But doesn't the IRS routinely arrange to prosecute tax-dodgers and even folks who merely sell books criticizing their agency, every year in March and early April, with the intention of "intimidating and coercing the civilian population" into paying their taxes?

Doesn't every lobbyist, every citizen who stands to speak at a meeting of a city council or a school board, hope his or her actions will "affect or influence the conduct or policy of a government entity"?

But not to worry. Assemblyman Perkins is busily amending his law as he goes along. He now insists his local version of the Alien & Sedition Act would only punish people "more severely" than the current murder statutes if they do something "dangerous to human life." Furthermore, a new preamble will specify that it's not intended to erode anyone's civil liberties.

(Well, there you go.)

"By putting the legislative intent into the record as we did, we provide extra safeguards for First Amendment rights," beams the speaker, who would get to enforce his own law, by the way, since he's also deputy chief of the Henderson Police Department. "I hope it allays some of the concerns some people have about violating civil rights," added the speaker ... while admitting he doubts the Legislature can craft a perfect bill that satisfies everyone.

Then why try?

In response to questions from Assemblyman Don Gustafson, R-Reno, on Wednesday, Mr. Perkins admitted that murder, attempted murder, and any other real crimes likely to be covered by his new law are already illegal in the Silver State.

The very fact Speaker Perkins is now racing to dress up his bill in a last-ditch attempt to make it meet constitutional muster only reveals how ill-considered and unnecessary it is in the first place.

Could "danger to human life" be taken to mean danger to the protesters' own lives? Might war protesters be arrested under the Perkins Act? "It is possible they would," testified Janine Hanson of the Nevada Eagle Forum.

"Under the USA Patriot Act and the act here, Martin Luther King would have been a terrorist," warned Peter Ediger of the Coalition to Prevent Erosion of Human Rights. "Moses would have been a terrorist. Jesus would have been a terrorist."

Judiciary Chairman Bernie Anderson, D-Sparks, warned committee members the bill will die for the year if it fails to pass out of either house by April 11.

Please. Just leave it in the drawer.

EXHIBIT F Committee on Judiciary

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