

Department of Homeland Security assembles “intelligence reports” on US journalists covering Portland protests

By Jacob Crosse
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In a chilling attack on journalism and the First Amendment, the *Washington Post* reported on Thursday that two US journalists, *New York Times* correspondent Mike Baker and editor in chief of the blog Lawfare, Benjamin Wittes, were the subject of three Open Source Intelligence Reports created by the Office of Intelligence and Analysis (I&A) within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

The reports summarized the recent social media activity of the establishment journalists including the fact that both had published leaked, unclassified documents regarding the ongoing federal occupation of Portland, Oregon by DHS paramilitary forces. The reports included descriptions and photos of the journalists Twitter profiles. The “intelligence products” also incorporated screengrabs of Baker’s and Wittes’ Twitter posts that featured DHS internal documents, including how many times the posts were liked, commented on, or shared by users.

Included in the reports were public tweets from Wittes in which he revealed internal DHS memos. The memos exposed that DHS intelligence operatives, known as “collectors” had collated intelligence reports on arrested protesters which included “FINTEL,” or financial intelligence. Collectors had also created “baseball cards” of arrested protesters with their faces and personal information included.

“Baseball card” dossiers have been used by the US military and intelligence agencies for decades as a way to familiarize soldiers, drone operators and spies with US imperialism’s most wanted targets. During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the US Defense Intelligence Agency developed a set of 52 playing cards made up of high-ranking members of the Iraqi government,

including Saddam Hussein and his family members. By 2018, all but 6 of Iraq’s “most wanted” had been either killed or captured.

The same types of dossiers, “baseball card” or “yearbook” style, were popularized by President Barack Obama during his “terror Tuesday” sessions which he conducted throughout his presidency. After pouring over the “kill lists” prepared by the intelligence agencies, Obama would personally sign off on the drone assassinations, which included American citizens and 90 percent of the time killed someone else besides the intended target.

The DHS I&A is a domestic intelligence agency aimed squarely at the US population. According to the agency’s own operating principles, the I&A’s mission is to integrate intelligence operations across all agencies within the DHS, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Customs and Border Protection, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, US Marshals as well as the private sector to “identify, mitigate and respond to threats.”

It is not known exactly to how many private, local, state and federal agencies the reports were disseminated, or if the I&A has compiled reports on other US journalists, civilians or, as the agency describes them, “threats.” It is also unknown if or how many I&A collectors are currently operating in other US cities besides Portland, and with what agencies, public or private, they are currently working.

Illustrating the global nature of the attack on journalism, the unclassified/for official use only reports carried a warning that the information contained therein was only “releasable to the governments of Australia, Canada, United Kingdom and New Zealand,” that is

the government's composed of the “Five Eyes” US-led surveillance network. This means that intel reports created by I&A have likely been disseminated to fascist sympathizers within the police agencies in each of these countries.

After the *Post* published its initial story online Thursday night, DHS spokesman Alexei Woltornist released a memo dated July 31 which tried to distance the agency's leadership from the actions of those directly under his charge. The memo reads in part: “Upon learning about the practice, Acting Secretary [Chad] Wolf directed the DHS Intelligence & Analysis Directorate to immediately discontinue collection information involving members of the press. In no way does the Acting Secretary condone this practice and he has immediately ordered an inquiry into the matter.”

The memo ended, implausibly, with Wolf professing his commitment to, “ensuring that all DHS personnel...respect...civil rights and civil liberties, particular as it relates to the exercise of First Amendment rights.” Journalists have been specifically targeted by police and paramilitaries for assault and arrest since the beginning of the nationwide protests following the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25.

The US Press Freedom Tracker, which catalogs various assaults on the press including arrests, physical attacks, equipment damage and teargassing noted that in the US, as of Thursday, there had been over 612 reported cases of “press freedom incidents” this year. Portland accounts for over one sixth of the nation's total incidents with 106 violations. Minneapolis/St. Paul follows with 99 incidents while New York and Washington, D.C. are nearly tied in third, with 41 and 40 incidents, respectively.

The revelation that the US government is developing intelligence reports on US journalists prompted a letter of “concern” from Democratic senators on the Senate Intelligence Committee. In a letter signed by senators Martin Heinrich (New Mexico), Mark Warner (Virginia), Dianne Feinstein (California), Ron Wyden (Oregon), Kamala Harris (California), Michael Bennet (Colorado) and independent Angus King (Maine), the senators demanded that the I&A maintain its “statute” obligations by keeping the, “congressional intelligence committees fully and currently informed of its operations.”

As is the case with the hundreds of federal agents now being deployed to Democratic controlled cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, Seattle and Portland, the Democratic party does not actually oppose the deployment of federal goon squads or construction of intelligence dossiers of US citizens as long as they are included in the decision making process.

There is no constituency within the US ruling class, or any other capitalist government, for the defense of democratic rights, including a free press. While Julian Assange is being silenced and jailed for exposing the crimes of US imperialism abroad, US journalists, the vast majority of whom have kept silent or encouraged Assange's ongoing persecution, now find themselves targets for exposing US police terror at home.

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