

Office of Current Production and Analytic Support

CIA Operations Center

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By Susan Hansen

States News Service

WASHINGTON, Sept. 14 -- Senator William Cohen of Maine Wednesday said that FBI internal reforms and disciplinary measures made following disclosure of alleged widespread illegal surveillance would offer a strong safeguard for Americans' civil liberties.

The senator commented after a Senate hearing Wednesday at which FBI Director William Sessions announced the two-week suspension of three agents who were part of the 27-month investigation of dozens of U.S. peace groups. Three other agents were formally censured. Sessions also announced several reforms intended to tighten control and monitoring of FBI investigations.

Cohen is vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that has been investigating the FBI's 1983-1985 probe of groups opposed to U.S. policy in Central America.

Although Cohen praised the agency's handling of the case, he urged that the names of all persons unfairly investigated during the 27-month probe be purged from FBI records.

"It strikes me as being somewhat ironic that those who accumulate points for violating traffic laws can have their names wiped off the records all together, while here we're talking about someone's name going into the FBI files for doing nothing more than exercising his constitutionally protected freedom," he said. Sessions did not specifically pledge to delete the names, but promised to review the request and report back to the committee.

The Intelligence Committee took up the matter last winter after the Center for Constitutional Rights, a civil liberties group, released documents detailing widespread surveillance of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) and other U.S. groups opposed to U.S. policy in Central America. The documents showed that FBI agents -- by spying, attending meetings undercover and checking public records -- had collected information on dozens of groups and hundreds of individuals.

Sen. Cohen said the FBI's probe had gone on "too long and far exceeded its legitimate scope."

"Once under way, the investigation lost its focus," he said, "broadening unnecessarily like an ink drop on a blotter, expanding in concentric circles and sweeping in a variety of innocent people who were simply exercising their constitutionally protected freedoms." FBI Director Sessions testified that the investigation was not politically motivated, but rather it reflected poor judgment and inadequate supervision. He specifically faulted the agency's failure to conduct a thorough check of allegations by Frank Varelli, the FBI source who first charged that CISPES was offering support to left wing terrorist groups in El Salvador.

The agency, during its investigation, produced no evidence linking CISPES or any other groups under surveillance to

SSCI
Sen. Cohen
CISPES

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International terrorism.

''The mistakes in judgement that took place during the CISPES investigations were serious ones and I cannot emphasize too strongly my firm conviction that there is no place for such mistakes in the work of the FBI,'' said Sessions. ''The sanctions I am imposing are intended to convey that conviction with clarity and vigor.''

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