



Government by Snitching

PATIENT / PATIENT BOOK SHELF



By Del Meyer, MD

SNITCH CULTURE — How Citizens are Turned into the Eyes and Ears of the State,
by Jim Redden,
Feral House, www.FeralHouse.com,
Venice, California © 2000, 235 pp, \$15,
ISBN: 0-922915-63-6.

Jim Redden, a journalist for 20 years and currently an investigative reporter for the Portland Tribune covering City Hall and crime, spoke at the recent annual convention of the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons in Cincinnati. As an investigative reporter on crime, he became increasingly concerned about living in a surveillance society.

Serious crime is at a 30-year low, with murder and violent felonies dropping throughout the nation. Minorities are earning more than ever, and schools have never been safer. Yet many live in a fear created and by opportunistic politicians and power-hungry law enforcement officials to justify this most sophisticated police state.

Redden blames this nightmare on the snitch, government's weapon of choice against criminals and law-abiding citizens. Snitching is not new and can be found referenced as evil in both Biblical and Shakespearean times.

Although recognized as necessary in times of need, snitching generally carries a very negative connotation with little positive value. Recently, 3,000 Anthrax tips were mostly false, and 11,000 terrorist tips were of no help. Yet snitching is pervasive. The same month *Forbes* had a cover depicting Life During Wartime with a series of articles on hidden micro-cameras, better eavesdropping with new technology and broader legal authority. It was a look at the compelling and alarming implications for your finances, businesses, and personal liberties during this new war on terrorism.

Although born during the wake of a war, Echelon — a joint project of five English-speaking countries since 1947, and maintained by the US Government's top secret National Security Agency — has a network of fiberoptic cables with a dragnet over the entire globe. It sifts through billions of e-mails, telephone calls, wireless transmissions and faxes daily. This ultimate intrusion, Redden maintains, continued during the cold war and relative peace.

The distinction between war and peace, however, is getting muddled. David Halberstam in his recent book, *War in A Time of Peace*, discusses the wars we experienced during the Bush and Clinton years. The B-2 bombers left Missouri on a 14-hour mission to the Balkans, hit their unseen targets, and returned by the following evening to rejoin their families. Americans may not have truly experience a war effort.

Redden documents that we have been intruding on private individuals for most of the last century. We are gathering incriminating information on babies even before birth. Teachers, counselors even other students spy on their classmates in public schools and

are encouraged to report those with "antisocial tendencies" which often results in suspensions, expulsions and arrest.

College campuses are riddled with informants. Politically active teachers are constantly monitored, as well as political student organizations.

Tracking continues even into the workforce. Routine pre-employment background checks may include information from neighbors and friends. The government may send over fake customers to trick businesses into breaking civil rights laws. In the same vein, licensing boards may send over fake patients to spy on us.

Encouraged by government snitch programs, children rat on their parents and siblings and parents squeal on their children. Neighbors as well as spouses are encouraged to spy on each other.

Obeying the law does not protect against informants, who frequently trick people into breaking the law, then lie and commit perjury. Snitch culture did not come about by accident. We are entertained by America's Most Wanted and The Jerry Springer Show.

Republicans and Democrats alike, working with law enforcement officials, have built a nationwide intelligence-gathering network: Wars on Crime, Drugs, Youth Violence, Spousal Abuse, Senior Abuse and now, The War on Terrorism. Redden thinks of these as America's War on You.

This book informs us of actual instances that support our current state of surveillance and presents case studies of past issues that have developed into peculiar forms of snitching that Americans now accept as normal government function.

It is truly a wake-up call. Redden warns us that being told that the government is your friend is like telling the blind kid, "Don't worry, you have nothing to be afraid of."

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