

# An Iron Curtain is Descending: And Most Americans Don't Know

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By Pariah

"Why are you travelling so often to Canada?" the tough U.S. border guard barked. I was on Amtrak, going from New York to Montreal, as I'd done dozen of times before over several decades. This was my first experience (summer 2006) of the increasingly standard and intrusive "U.S. Exit Interviews" on trains crossing the border.

01/30/07 "Counterpunch" -- - I've been hassled on every train crossing since then, most recently January 2007. The U.S. now has a combined FBI-compiled file of all arrests and charges at all government levels for millions of Americans, and this is instantly viewable by police in many jurisdictions, including border officials of the U.S. and most other countries. In some cities, local police can access this file via one's license plate. The files do NOT show the favorable disposition of arrests that did not lead to charges or of dismissals and findings of innocence. "And what's this entry stamp from Canada, with no country of departure? Was that from Cuba? You know U.S. citizens may not travel to Cuba--you could be imprisoned and fined."

This

line of questioning has been part of every exit interview since. The first time, the guard took my passport and kept it for about 30 minutes. Others--Canadians and foreigners as well as U.S. citizens--were getting similar queries, but mine took much longer. "We'll let the Canadians handle this," the guard said as he handed back the passport. Moments later, across the border, I heard a Quebecois immigration agent tell her colleague, gesturing at me, "He's the one." She, too, took my passport for quite awhile. "She came back with information from my FBI file-- I have a long record of political arrests from civil rights and anti-war actions. The Canadians said the FBI file showed a conviction in 1970 for a draft-board sit-in. The agent said I would be admitted only for two weeks and could not re-enter until my file was fully investigated. She told me she understood the conviction was for a political act with which "Canada agreed at the time," but said the Canadians had an agreement with the U.S. to investigate such cases.

Two

weeks after I returned from Canada, the Canadian immigration agent called me: "We have fully investigated your dossier--you have been approved and are welcome to return when you wish." Since that time, I continue to be hassled by the U.S. "exit" police, but I am always dealt with quickly and politely by the Canadians. It is clear from my experience--as well as that of U.S. Green Party and peace activists barred from entering Canada during anti-globalization demonstrations two years ago, that a million or more former peaceniks and other radicals will now see more and more attempts to keep them at home.

Most

Americans are unaware of the new police state procedures of U.S. officials who seek to keep millions of Americans from traveling--including trips across the border to our North, once thought the least difficult international frontier in the world to cross. There are now regular stops and "internal" checkpoints for cars traveling toward, away from or near the border in states from Maine to Washington. This includes permanent checkpoints on interstates one hundred or more miles from the border in New York and Vermont, as well as moving patrols who stop motorists in all parts of the border states. Some have called these "whiteness checkpoints," since the border guards often pull over dark-skinned motorists and people perceived as Middle Easterners. Civil libertarians and others in the border states--including conservative farmers--have protested this dramatic departure from the assumed tradition of allowing Americans freedom of travel--certainly freedom to leave their own country. Homeland Security, which supervises the "U.S. Customs and Border Protection" squads (CBP), admits that few terrorists (some say none) have been apprehended by this dubious process, but various "sex offenders and other criminals" have been caught, and drugs and

other contraband seized. This is in addition to the "exit interviews" of Americans leaving by train or bus, which are now routine.

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group, aside from dark-skinned people and Muslims, targeted by the internal checkpoints, are students and other young people. Persons under 18 cannot cross a U.S. border alone, unless they are with a guardian and have notarized letters from a parent, as well as a passport issued in their own name. Persons between 18 and 21 may be questioned about their intention to engage in behavior (sex or drinking or marijuana use) strongly penalized in the U.S., but either decriminalized or lightly punished in Canada. Up until three years ago, unaccompanied persons over 16 were seldom checked--and longer ago, even younger persons could travel alone or with a non-parental adult. Student groups, including bus tour groups, now report very close scrutiny from the U.S. Exit police. Some bus companies now refuse to take groups of students under 21 across U.S. borders because of hassles they face. Gone are the days when an 18 or over driver could skit across from Burlington to Montreal with a car-full of late-teens hoping to taste the more liberal morals up north.

The big

media story about all this has been the new requirement that all U.S. air travelers returning home must now have passports, including those coming from Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean, and that citizens of those countries must also have passports when coming by air--as of Jan. 23. Similar requirements for passports at land and sea crossings will go into effect sometime after next January 1. (These measures have been strongly protested by Canada and Mexico, to little avail.) Aside from the expense of passports, which puts the usual strain on low-income people, having to have passports even to go and come from Canada or Mexico will limit a very large number of Americans from international travel, period. With the passport requirement, several huge new segments of the American population will be unable to travel abroad, even on day-trips from Detroit to Windsor, Buffalo to Niagara Falls, or Calexico to Mexicali.

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group that gets very special attention are registered sex offenders, of whom there are now just over 600,000 in the U.S. The public generally approves of all measures to limit or control this group of pariahs, never mind the fact that few of these were violent rapists, and that many are forced to register for decades or life, long after minimal offenses--including prostitution and public sex, or in some cases even urinating in public. Beyond sex offenders, though, virtually all the 5 million plus persons who are on parole or probation for state and federal felonies will be unable to keep or get passports. Another large group are the 4 million or so who are "child support delinquents." At the very least, about 2 million (mostly male, but some female) "deadbeats" meet the minimum requirement of being \$5,000 or more behind in their payments, which triggers (since 1994) automatic passport cancellation or denial. Among these are at least a half million teenage fathers, mostly very low income school drop-outs, often unemployed and sometimes homeless.

All of

these groups who are forbidden international travel are related to class and race discrimination. Of the 5 million on parole or probation, a far higher percentage are black or Hispanic than would be warranted by their prevalence in the overall population. By some estimates, between 13 and 20% of all black men are now in this category, and thus forbidden to hold or keep passports.

Most

media attention about new U.S. travel restrictions has focused on harm to tourism and other business--with considerable protest from border communities about across border trade, and from U.S., Canadian and Mexican travel agencies. A Canadian government website dedicated to international trade, Strategis.Ca, estimates that there has already been an 8% reduction of U.S. visitors to Canada and a 7% reduction of Canadian visitors to the U.S., but that this will rise to 14% or more by the end of 2007 for visitors in both directions. Gay tourism to

meccas like Montreal and Vancouver is decidedly down--some say as much as 30%. This would reflect the greater likelihood that gay men and women, like non-whites and the poor, would fall afoul of U.S. laws more frequently due to discrimination.

At the beginning of the Cold War, Winston Churchill made his famous comment about an iron curtain descending across Europe. Like many others, I experienced this iron curtain. I faced incessant exit and entry police interrogations in places like East Berlin and at the Soviet borders. In those days, such long waits to get OUT of a country, as well as to get in, were limited to the "Communist" block primarily. Thank goodness, we'd think, this could not happen in America. Now that virtually all travel barriers have fallen throughout Europe--including Eastern Europe, and with travel in and out of China or Vietnam far easier than before, it is around the U.S. that the iron curtain seems to be descending. As in the Soviet or Chinese blocks before (or more recently in Cuba), the elites could travel, but the various dissidents, deviants and ordinary folk could not. This sad fact is becoming increasingly the case for many U, S, citizens today. So far, very few liberals or libertarians have taken note of this chilling trend to limit travel for huge numbers of Americans. Unless protests against these measures grow quickly, it will be too late to stop or even slow them down. America, like Russia and China before it, will become a prison for many of its people.

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in Canada.