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Statement of the ACLU-IA related to Des Moines Visit of Attorney General John Ashcroft

by R. Ben Stone, ACLU-IA Executive Director
8/21/2003

Today in Des Moines, the Attorney General of the United States is giving yet another speech to a closed audience of law enforcement personnel. Like many in this administration, he has chosen to avoid speaking to the American people. Instead he prefers to confine his speaking to hand-picked audiences, thus creating the illusion of agreement and consensus.

Meanwhile, around the country, from small, conservative towns to big cities, Americans from all over the political spectrum are speaking out against the PATRIOT Act.

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Ashcroft's PATRIOT Act 'charm offensive' comes in the midst of rapidly growing public concern about portions of the 2001 law, which was passed with little debate shortly after the September 11 attacks. In recent months, the Department of Justice has been roundly criticized for this legislation and its questionable record on civil liberties in the post-9/11 era.

Last month Republican Rep. C.L. "Butch" Otter (R-ID), from the conservative heartland, sponsored an amendment to a key spending bill prohibiting the implementation of a section of the law facilitating federal agents' use of secret "sneak and peek" searches, which permit a delay in notification that a search was conducted. Also in Congress, Alaska Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski and Oregon Democrat Ron Wyden recently introduced a bill to narrow other sections of the law, and Sen. Russell Feingold (D-WI) sponsored a bill to roll back Section 215 of the PATRIOT Act, which allows the FBI to access Americans' library records without showing probable cause. In addition, the

ACLU filed the first-ever challenge to the PATRIOT Act, which also deals with Section 215.

Across the United States, more than 150 communities - including three states - have passed local government resolutions calling for a fix to troubling sections of the PATRIOT Act. And, while the Department of Justice continues to downplay the resolutions drive as the product of "liberal college towns," communities as disparate - and conservative - as Castle Valley, Utah; Carrboro, North Carolina, and the always independent state of Alaska have passed broadly popular pro-civil liberties measures.

One of our primary concerns with the tour is that it appears to be designed to prop up other politically ailing legislative initiatives, including the expansive sequel to the PATRIOT Act, known as PATRIOT II, or the new VICTORY Act, which contains four PATRIOT II provisions. Lawmakers and advocacy groups from across the political spectrum, including conservative mainstays like the American Conservative Union and Grover Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform, oppose both pieces of legislation.

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