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ACLU-IA Criticizes Attorney General's Plan to Bypass the Public on his Visit to Des Moines - Aug 19 2003

by R. Ben Stone, ACLU-IA Executive Director
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DES MOINES - The American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa today criticized Attorney General John Ashcroft's plan to avoid the public and address only law enforcement officials when he comes to Des Moines on Thursday on his new national tour to defend the PATRIOT Act and the government's war on terrorism.

"It is interesting that Mr. Ashcroft is limiting his speaking tour stops to closed audiences that are inclined to support him," said Ben Stone, Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Iowa. "Since the Attorney General even refused to take questions at his press conference earlier today, it would appear that the Justice Department is afraid to subject its policies to a public debate," Stone added.

The PATRIOT Act has come under increasing criticism, not only from the ACLU, but from Congress as well. Most recently, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 309 to 118 to repeal one of the more egregious parts of the USA Patriot Act -- the "sneak and peek" provision which allows law enforcement to search a home without telling the targeted individual.

On July 30, the ACLU filed a lawsuit challenging Section 215 of the PATRIOT Act, a provision that vastly expands the power of FBI agents to secretly obtain records and personal belongings of innocent people in the United States, including citizens and permanent residents.

Americans are responding to the ever-growing list of examples of civil liberties abuses in the post-9/11 fight against terrorism, including:

- The June DOJ Inspector General report detailing widespread and systematic abuses of the hundreds of Arab, Muslim and South Asian men detained in the weeks after 9/11. The report showed that, even though the men were found to have no connection whatsoever to the attacks on September 11, they were held for extreme amounts of time - in some cases for several months - under a quasi-official "no-bond, no-lawyers" policy. Although the Justice Department's response has been a pat "we did nothing illegal," it's clear that most of the detainees were

held on pretextual immigration violations such as an expired visa or incomplete paperwork.

- The proposed neighbor-spying-on-neighbor program called Operation TIPS, which would have recruited Americans whose jobs - such as cable repair persons and postal workers - grant them easy access to our homes as government informers, charged with reporting "suspicious activity" to a dedicated tips hotline.
- The plan to base the number of investigations in any given FBI jurisdiction on demographic criteria, including the number of mosques in the area.
- The initiative at the DOJ to force local and state police to enforce immigration laws, a plan opposed not only by immigrants' advocates but also by law enforcement officials themselves.

Several of the cities on Ashcroft's itinerary have already joined in a national movement to pass local and regional resolutions calling for increased civil liberties protections. To date, 152 communities across the country have passed these resolutions, including three states: Alaska, Hawaii and Vermont. Significantly, the list of communities isn't exclusive to "liberal college towns," as DOJ officials charge. Resolution movements are cropping up everywhere from East Coast to West and from the Heartland to the South. In Iowa, according to the ACLU-IA's Stone, citizen resolution efforts are underway in Waterloo and Iowa City.

For more information on the resolution movement, go to <http://www.aclu.org/SafeandFree/SafeandFree.cfm?ID=11256&c=206>