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Pentagon Exam Calls Protests 'Low-Level Terrorism,' Angering Activists

Updated: Thursday, 18 Jun 2009, 7:46 AM CDT
Published : Wednesday, 17 Jun 2009, 11:46 PM CDT

A written exam administered by the Pentagon labels "protests" as a form of "low-level terrorism" — enraging civil liberties advocates and activist groups who say it

shows blatant disregard of the First Amendment.

The written exam, given as part of Department of Defense employees' routine training, includes a multiple-choice question that asks:

"Which of the following is an example of low-level terrorism?"

- Attacking the Pentagon
- IEDs
- Hate crimes against racial groups
- Protests

The correct answer, according to the exam, is "Protests."

"It's part of a pattern of equating dissent and protest with terrorism," said Ann Brick, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union, which obtained a copy of the question after a Defense Department employee who was taking the test printed the screen on his or her computer terminal.

"It undermines the core constitutional values the Department of Defense is supposed to be defending," Brick said, referring to the First Amendment right to peaceably assemble.

She said the ACLU has asked the Defense Department to remove the question and send out a correction to all employees who took the exam.

"There were other employees who were unhappy with it and disturbed by it," Brick said.

Pentagon spokesman Lt. Col. Les Melnyk said the Defense Department is looking into the matter and expects to provide more information later Wednesday.

"We need to determine if it's something we're currently doing," Melnyk said. "A lot of the information in this exam is intended for people stationed abroad. We counsel those people to avoid demonstrations."

Anti-war protesters, who say they have been targets of federal surveillance for years, were livid when they were told about the exam question.

"That's illegal," said George Martin, national co-chairman of United for Peace and Justice. "Protest in terms of legal dissent has to be recognized, especially by the authorities."

"It's not terrorism or a lack of patriotism. We care enough to be active in our government."

Bill Wilson, president of the Americans for Limited Government, which supported the Tea Party demonstrations earlier this year, agreed.

"Groups like Al Qaeda and Hezbollah, paramilitary organizations that are striking at out at something they oppose or hate, that's terrorism," Wilson said.

"To equate that in any degree with citizens being able to express themselves seems to me to be headed down a road where all dissent is suspect and questionable."

Ben Friedman, a research fellow at the Cato Institute in Washington, said the U.S. government has a long history of infringing upon citizens' civil liberties in the name of domestic security.

"It's the kind of thing that happens when you have large security bureaucracies, which is why they need to be kept in check," Friedman said. "These things tend to occur in times of panic, like after Sept. 11."

The ACLU, in a letter of complaint it sent to the Defense Department, catalogued a list of what it said were recent civil liberties violations by federal authorities, including the monitoring of anti-war protests and the FBI's surveillance of potential

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protesters at the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York.

Martin said getting information on the extent of the FBI and National Security Agency's surveillance programs is nearly impossible.

"I have been arrested within 100 yards of George W. Bush and spoken out against the policies of our government in more than 100 countries," he said. "But they said they have no record on me. I don't believe that."

During Bush's presidency, the Defense Department was criticized for infringing on citizens' civil rights through surveillance programs designed to protect the nation against terrorist attacks. Brick said she has seen no indication that there will be a change in policy under President Obama.

"We need to see what they do," she said. "In a number of areas the Obama administration has not backed off and kept the Bush administration line."

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