

## The Personal is Political

## Feminist Writers

[For more commentary](#)

Sara Paretsky

### For Those Who Wish to Dissent: Speech, Silence and Patriotism

Chicago Tribune - September 21, 2003

A cloud of unknowing surrounds St. Johns College in Santa Fe, Andrew O'Connor and his long interrogation by Albuquerque police and the Secret Service in February 2003. O'Connor was removed from the college library by police after he made negative comments about President Bush in an online chat room. But since he was ultimately released without being charged, he clearly had not threatened the president's life. What he said, how the police and Secret Service knew he said it, and the gag order on the college to keep people from talking about his arrest, are all shrouded in silence.

Similarly, we don't know what a New Jersey library user was reading the day another patron called the police to report that the man was looking at a foreign-language Web page. But the man was hauled off for questioning, held without being allowed to call his home or a lawyer, and then released without being charged. We also don't know why the FBI arrived at a California student's home hours after she talked on the phone about bomb icons in a video game she was playing.

The only thing we do know is that all these acts by police and FBI are legal under the USA Patriot Act. A few years ago, I was almost arrested in the middle of the night. The police stopped a hit man just before he reached his target. The hit man had a card with my name and the title of one of my books on the seat next to him, and the police were sure I was involved. But they had to get a warrant, and the assistant state's attorney wouldn't issue it. Today, though, the cops could just come and get me. And U.S. Atty. Gen. John Ashcroft thinks that's fine.

In fact, as Ashcroft has taken his dog-and-pony show on the road, he's been saying that not only is it good for the police to arrest me, or library patrons, or college students, without needing to show probable cause, they should have even more power. They should be able to search all our records, and to hold us without bail when they do arrest us. He says those of us objecting are "raising the phantom of lost liberty," and we're giving "ammunition to America's enemies."

I grew up in Kansas during the shadow of the Cold War, when religion and patriotism were conflated and we attended daylong revivals of religion and daylong lectures on patriotism. The local paper pilloried my parents for

questioning the revivals, printing their phone number and urging readers to call them-- which happened for some months, usually in the middle of the night. A popular high school teacher had to resign because he was doing a PhD in Russian history--and only a communist would study Russia. In the larger society, Martin Luther King Jr. was hounded with lies claiming he was a communist, and Dashiell Hammett, who wrote "The Maltese Falcon," spent six months in prison for refusing to name names to the infamous House Un-American Activities Committee. Hammett's publishers even bowed to pressure from the House and briefly took his books out of print.

These days, the chill-silencing winds of my childhood are starting to blow at gale force again. I am a frightened citizen right now, more scared than I've been since the first few weeks after Sept. 11, 2001. The situation in post-war Iraq seems to be creating, not eliminating, new sources of terror, while the nation's worst blackout on Aug. 14 shows how vulnerable we are. And Ashcroft's response is to say that any questions about his policies, any questions about governmental lies, secrets or silences, is tantamount to treason.

When I started writing my most recent book, "Blacklist," it was under the shadow of the attack on the Twin Towers. I started writing it soon after Sept. 11--maybe too soon, when I was still feeling numbed and shocked. I started with my detective, V.I. Warshawski, in that state--it was the only way I could write, by having her express the reality of my feelings--the feelings we all had two years ago. During the 18 months it took me to write the book, the powers of the Patriot Act and the actions of the U.S. attorney general began frightening me almost as much as Al Qaeda.

Silence and speech are the hallmarks of my work: who can speak, what can they say, who will listen to them? In "Blacklist," V.I. gets penned into a smaller and smaller space by an array of business and political leaders who call on the power of the Patriot Act to silence her. She finally figures out a strategy to wriggle out of danger. But in the real world today, I don't know how someone would evade the police and political forces V.I. faces--I don't know how I would.

I think of Patrick Henry's cry to the Burgesses, "Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?" and William Lloyd Garrison's cry to slavery forces, "I am in earnest. I will not equivocate; I will not excuse; I will not retreat a single inch; and I will be heard." I don't want ever to face the choice the U.S. Congress gave Dashiell Hammett: choose between prison and betraying my friends. I don't want to be pilloried in the papers, as my parents were, or have my books blacklisted. But even more, I hope if I am put to the test for my beliefs, I will be strong enough to stand with our true patriots, with Patrick Henry and William Lloyd Garrison, with Dashiell Hammett--and my parents.

Sara Paretsky is a mystery novelist

Copyright © 2003, Chicago Tribune

[Home Page](#)

[The Avalon Project](#) - [Discography](#) - [Concerts](#) - [Music Orders](#)  
[The Personal Is Political](#) - [Information](#) - [Connexions](#)

Copyright © 1998-2003 MargieAdam.com - All rights reserved  
Site created and maintained by [Lucille Design](#)