

---

May 7, 2008

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Burger With a Side of Spies

By ERIC SCHLOSSER

Monterey, Calif.

WHILE the Patriot Act has raised fears about government spying on ordinary citizens, the growing threat to civil liberties posed by corporate spying has received much less attention. During the late 1990s, a private security firm spied on Greenpeace and other environmental groups, examining activists' phone records and even sending undercover agents to infiltrate the groups, according to an article in Mother Jones. In 2006 Hewlett-Packard was caught spying on journalists. Last year Wal-Mart apologized for improperly recording conversations with a New York Times reporter.

And now it turns out that the Burger King Corporation, home of the Whopper, hired a private security firm to spy on the Student/Farmworker Alliance, a group of idealistic college students trying to improve the lives of migrants in Florida.

The Student/Farmworker Alliance and an affiliated nonprofit, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, have for years been urging the fast-food industry to accept some responsibility for the plight of Florida migrants who harvest the tomatoes for its hamburgers and tacos. I am a longtime supporter of their work. The wages of these farm workers, adjusted for inflation, have declined by as much as 70 percent since the late 1970s. And hundreds, perhaps thousands, of migrants have been enslaved by labor contractors and forced to work without pay. The McDonald's Corporation and Yum Brands (which owns Taco Bell, Pizza Hut and KFC) have agreed to subsidize a modest pay raise for their tomato pickers and work closely with the coalition to eliminate slavery from the fields. Burger King, however, has pursued a different strategy.

In March, a woman named Cara Schaffer contacted the Student/Farmworker Alliance, saying she was a student at Broward Community College. Her eagerness aroused suspicions, but she was allowed to join two of the group's planning sessions. Internet searches by the alliance revealed that she was not a college student.

Ms. Schaffer is the 25-year-old owner of a private security firm. Her company, Diplomatic Tactical Services, seems like the kind of security firm you'd find in one of Carl Hiaasen's crime thrillers. Last year Ms. Schaffer was denied a private investigator's license; she had failed to supply the Florida licensing division with proof of "lawfully gained, verifiable experience or training." Even more unsettling, one of her former subcontractors, Guillermo Zarabozo, is now facing murder charges in United States District Court in Miami for his role in allegedly executing four crew members of a charter fishing boat, then dumping their bodies at sea.

In an interview, a Burger King executive told me that the company had worked with Diplomatic Tactical Services for years on "security-related matters" and had used it to obtain information about the Student/Farmworker Alliance's plans — in order to prevent acts of violence. "It is both the corporation's right and duty," a company

spokesman later wrote in an e-mail message to me, “to protect its employees and assets from potential harm.”

But the Student/Farmworker Alliance and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers are not dangerous, extremist groups. Both are pacifist, mainstream nonprofits inspired by the work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The coalition is supported by the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Foundation, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Pax Christi, the Catholic peace movement.

The Bill of Rights was adopted to protect Americans from the abusive power of their government. I’ve come to believe that we now need a similar set of restrictions to defend against irresponsible corporate power. Today companies like Wal-Mart and ExxonMobil have annual revenues larger than the entire budgets of some states, and they employ former agents from the F.B.I., the C.I.A. and the Secret Service to do security work. Unlike government agencies, whose surveillance activities are supposed to be conducted according to strict guidelines and court orders, these private firms operate with a remarkable degree of freedom. At the moment, federal laws against the practice of “pretexting” — using a false identity to obtain personal information — apply only to financial and telephone records.

Congressional hearings on corporate espionage would be a good place to start figuring out how to regulate the practice. A Senate inquiry during the 1930s prompted companies to disband their private armies and stop spying on labor unions. Burger King’s use of an unlicensed private investigator to spy on the Student/Farmworker Alliance may have been illegal under Florida law. John Chidsey, the chief executive of Burger King, knew about the use of Diplomatic Tactical Services. Mr. Chidsey should get a chance to raise his right hand and tell members of Congress why he thinks this sort of behavior is acceptable.

*Eric Schlosser is the author of “Fast Food Nation” and “Reefer Madness.”*

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)

---