

OPINION

EDITORIALS

The LAPD's snooping habit

THE LOS ANGELES Police Department's infiltration of an anti-Trump activist group is deeply troubling and brings to mind a long history of improper LAPD spying.

As The Times reported on July 19, police directed an informant to record meetings of the Los Angeles chapter of Refuse Fascism in October 2017. The four meetings were held at Echo Park United Methodist Church.

The LAPD is investigating the episode, but it is not clear why the department has to keep relearning the same lesson: Snooping on the public in order to gather intelligence is off-limits unless authorities have a reasonable belief that there is a crime afoot.

Without a credible tip or other evidence, monitoring a conversation or a meeting is a fishing expedition at best. When directed at people of a particular political leaning, race or creed, it's unlawful harassment.

The LAPD's surveillance hall of shame includes infiltrating labor unions in the 1920s, the Black Panthers in the 1960s, Native American activists in the 1970s, protests and gatherings coinciding with the Democratic National Convention in 2000, and many other police operations whose purpose was to develop dossiers on individuals or undermine organizations but not to investigate or stop particular crimes.

In order to prevent such abuses, the LAPD adopted protocols that require approval from a designated member of the civilian Police Commission before using an undercover informant. That didn't happen

in the case of the Refuse Fascism infiltration, ostensibly because it was part of an ongoing criminal investigation. The department has offered no evidence that it had reason to believe a crime was likely, but in any case, public confidence in the department is best served by erring more clearly in favor of seeking civilian approval.

In policing, approvals and disclosures are not mere niceties. For example, the department developed a meticulous protocol for deploying drones after serious pushback from critics who argued that the airborne cameras would almost certainly be used to spy on private citizens. No, LAPD leaders argued, the deployment guidelines, and follow-up reports to the commission and the public, would prevent that. The police commission ultimately approved the pilot drone program in October 2017 — just as the department was spying on Refuse Fascism.

What does LAPD snooping have to do with drones? Nothing, if police observe their public protection protocols in letter and spirit. Everything, if they don't.

It's worth wondering whether the commission's confidence in the LAPD's drone protocols would have been so high if the members had known of the spying going on at the same time at Echo Park United Methodist Church. It's worth wondering whether their vote on the pilot program would have gone the same way — and whether, in the wake of the spying revelation, they will be quite so trusting when a new set of guidelines for a permanent drone program comes before them later this summer.

Ricardo Lara's missteps

RICARDO LARA has served as insurance commissioner for not quite eight months, and in that short time he's managed to cast a pall over the Department of Insurance by taking donations from insurance company representatives and their spouses (when he said he wouldn't, in the tradition of his predecessors) and then reversing decisions to the benefit of some of those donors. The Democrat and former state senator also may have violated the law by meeting with an executive of one of the companies while its case was pending before his department.

When the donations were revealed earlier this month, we noted that they raised the appearance of undue influence. With subsequent revelations of his office's actions affecting the insurer Applied Underwriters, it now seems there was good reason for concern. We suspect (and hope) that this is a case of ignorance and inexperience by the new commissioner, rather than something more sinister. But we just don't know. Lara says he has returned the donations, offering a hard-to-believe excuse that he didn't realize where the donations came from despite acting as his own campaign treasurer. This is unacceptable from the man charged with protecting Californians against insurance company gouging.

Empowered to regulate premiums for car, home and business policies, the insurance commissioner makes decisions that directly affect the pocketbook of nearly every

Californian. In early May, Lara signed off on two proposed decisions by administrative law judges that would have forced Applied Underwriters, a workers comp insurer owned by Warren Buffet's Berkshire Hathaway, to collect less than it sought from two small-business customers. Later that month, Lara's reelection campaign received \$46,500 in donations from Applied executives and their spouses in a single day. In early June, Lara granted the company's request to reconsider the decisions, and in July, his office amended the decisions in a way that might be legitimate — but which is financially beneficial to Applied and is tainted by his acceptance of the contributions.

Lara says that he didn't have much to do with the decisions. His legal team signed off on the original rulings, he says, and only later discovered inconsistencies that needed to be changed lest the two companies be left without any workers comp coverage, imperiling their employees. This is plausible, considering Lara's inability to fully articulate publicly the legal implications of the changes and his lack of relevant experience when he was elected. Nevertheless, the decisions have been called into question by his own actions and further muddled by his bungled response.

The scandal couldn't have hit the department at a worse time. The state is facing a serious wildfire insurance crisis, and it needs a regulator who is well-versed, engaged and above reproach.

Is Amoeba Music a landmark?

THERE'S A SCENE in the movie "L.A. Story" in which Steve Martin's character, while showing a British journalist around Los Angeles, proudly boasts: "Some of these buildings are over 20 years old."

The Amoeba Music store in Hollywood? It was built 18 years ago. That's not even old by "L.A. Story" standards, and certainly not in comparison to other structures in the city that have been designated for preservation.

That hasn't stopped the AIDS Healthcare Foundation and its anti-development advocacy group, the Coalition to Preserve L.A., from filing a lawsuit to block construction of a 26-story tower on the Amoeba site on the spurious argument that the record store is a historic and cultural landmark.

In addition to the lawsuit, AHF filed a 1,123-page application package asking the city to officially designate the building a historic-cultural monument. The application argues for protected status because the building is covered in murals, neon and street art, and because the store is associated with a historic person — Sir Paul McCartney, who played a concert there in 2007 that resulted in not one, but two, albums.

But c'mon. The idea that Amoeba Music is a cultural or historic monument because an ex-Beatle played a concert there a decade ago is laughable. The landmark claim is a ruse to block the project and is part of AHF's campaign to stop Hollywood's shift into a denser, transit-oriented community.

The new lawsuit alleges that the city of L.A. erred by not requiring the developer to do a full environmental review. The city counters that the project qualified for a state-mandated exemption designed to ease the building of housing near transit if the project includes affordable units.

The project on the Amoeba site is about half a mile from a subway station, wouldn't displace any renters and sets aside 5% of the 200 apartments for very-low-income tenants. The developer is also paying \$2.5 million to help build and preserve affordable housing in the area.

There is a worthy fight underway over whether L.A. should require more affordable units in market-rate development projects. The state and city need to do a better job protecting renters from displacement as Hollywood gentrifies. And, yes, it's fair to lament that the funky, artsy corners of Hollywood are slowly being replaced. But Los Angeles needs to build a lot more housing, and it makes sense to concentrate that housing in communities like Hollywood that have jobs, amenities and good transit.

By the way, this isn't the sad tale of a beloved record shop being evicted by a greedy landlord. Amoeba Music's owners sold the site to a developer in 2015 for \$34 million. They're planning to move to another location nearby. Who's to say they won't create another colorful music mecca down the street? And if this silly lawsuit gets stopped, 200 new neighbors could shop there.

LETTERS



JOHN MACDOUGALL AFP/Getty Images

A VOLKSWAGEN plant in Germany. The automaker agreed to a fuel standard with California.

A clean-air hero

Re "California and 4 automakers agree on fuel standards, spurning Trump," July 26

Is there a more effective public servant in California than Mary Nichols?

Her nearly two decades as chairwoman of the California Air Resources Board has enabled our state to lead the nation, and much of the world, in efficiency. She realized early on that we needed to transition to clean, renewable electricity, and that electrifying transportation was key to any successful outcome.

To that end, CARB began gradually regulating both stationary and mobile pollution sources, allowing the industry sufficient time to increase efficiency.

Nichols, along with a solid staff of experts, arm-wrestled a third of the auto industry into compliance by offering them an extra year. The rest of the industry will comply because they want to do business here.

Standing up to Trump and winning in such a public fashion deserves admiration from all of us who want a cleaner environment.

PAUL SCOTT
Santa Monica

The writer is co-founder of the electric vehicle advocacy group Plug-In America.

In this appalling era, with the Trump administration and the Republican Party blatantly siding with Russia and big polluters on every front, the news about automakers actually doing the right thing and making a deal with California regulators to improve fuel mileage is mind-boggling.

Even if Honda, Ford, Volkswagen and BMW are motivated by a desire to avoid a regulatory nightmare, the decision is a win for public health, the environment and the fight against climate change.

Of course, in light of what was known about climate change decades ago, automakers should have worked to improve fuel standards and promote electric cars years ago, potentially staying off the extreme heat waves and flooding now wracking the planet. And the bar is now so, so low.

But with oil and coal lobbyists happily installed in federal environmental agencies, working overtime to help their friends squeeze the last dollar out of every drop of oil, this news is an exhilarating win. What a proud time for California and a major victory for the planet.

WENDY BLAIS
North Hills

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Kudos to Gov. Gavin Newsom for a twofer this week: having four major automakers agree to support California's effort to increase fuel standards, and getting three investor-owned utilities to pay into a state disaster fund.

Small thinkers who cling to the past need to be sat in the corner.

CHUCK HEINZ
West Hills

They're citizens, and they vote

Re "Proud citizens sense a creeping threat," July 26

Like some of the naturalized Americans who feel under attack by the Trump administration, I arrived here as a child and took the oath of citizenship at the age of 13. It is one of the most lasting emotional memories I have, raising my hand and swearing to defend my country.

My parents were also naturalized citizens and were proud to vote in every election, as I do now. This is my country, my home.

I was very much ashamed, sad and then angry to hear the chant "Send her back" at a recent rally for President Trump. You can be sure that I will exercise my vote to change what has happened in my country.

ESTHER FRIEDBERG
Studio City

The campaign of hate against people born outside the United States did not originate with our current president. His opportunistic latching onto this issue needs to be seen as what it is: a cynical way to motivate a portion of the electorate to vote their fear and hate.

Trump is just smart enough to recognize an issue that will gain him support, and he has jumped on this beginning with his "birther" attacks on President Obama. While he has a history of using low-paid immigrants at his businesses, the president has joined with that dark segment of our country where people blame all their problems on foreign-born residents.

In this effort he has been joined enthusiastically with most of the GOP, who have used this to make themselves almost invisible in California.

As this country always has been and is becoming more and more a country of immigrants, it is clear that while Trump and his cohorts are riding high now, they are sliding down the wrong end of history.

DAVID GOOLER
Pasadena

Destroying art, like the Taliban

Re "George Washington's mural," editorial, July 26

In 2001, the ruling Taliban in Afghanistan dynamited two sandstone statues of Buddha that dated to the 6th century. In 2017, the Islamic State destroyed the tetrapylon and the facade of the Roman theater in the ancient city of Palmyra, Syria.

Historically, authoritarian regimes have destroyed or sequestered art that they found offensive. But here in America?

Now, the San Francisco Unified School District will paint over an 80-year-old mural depicting the life and deeds of our first president. What's wrong with this picture?

Wisdom demands that we take a hard look at the degree to which current cultural dictates are, increasingly, narrowing discourse and diminishing creativity and self-expression in our land. Best intentions and genuine sensibilities aside, might we perhaps be at risk of becoming censors and dictators in our own right?

JEFF DENKER
Malibu

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I was delighted to read your editorial in favor of preserving the Victor Arnautoff mural on the walls of George Washington High School in San Fran-

cisco, a priceless treasure painted during the New Deal years.

I've seen many expressions of public outrage over the San Francisco Board of Education's vote to paint over it at the cost of \$600,000 because the depictions of ugly aspects of our history might offend students, but your editorial did a particularly fine job of identifying the key issues.

The controversy over the mural represents a wonderful "teachable moment" for students. We don't want to engage in Taliban-like destruction of art in this country.

GLENN MATTHEWS
Laguna Beach

••

I hope we can save that mural for the future.

Why can't the school district just cover it with drywall and paint every country's flag except that of the United States and just let the mural be?

Then maybe when this crazy era is over, we can take off the drywall and still have the Washington mural.

BILL VERDELL
Los Angeles

Fires? No policy for you

Re "Home insurance goes up in smoke," July 23

Regarding the article on home insurance policies being canceled or made unaffordable to residents of fire-prone areas, it isn't only rural or semi-rural homeowners who are being affected.

I've lived for more than 70 years in a tile-roofed home across the street from a fire hydrant, three blocks north of Los Feliz Boulevard, and three blocks west of Vermont Avenue. After decades with Farmers Insurance Group and one claim 20 years ago, my annual rate went from \$5,120 to \$10,005.

Even my agent was stunned and worked hard to find me an alternate company. She said the ones she contacted were raising rates on everyone to cover their losses from the fires in Northern California.

MEG QUINN COULTER
Los Angeles

Not a military of mercenaries

Re "Congress and its war powers," letters, July 26

I take great exception to your decision to print one of the letters on adopting policies that make it more difficult for this nation to go to war.

While I agree with the readers' sentiment about reinstating the draft, the writer's use of the word "mercenary" to describe the American military is deplorable.

Whether used as an adjective or a noun, its various definitions make it inaccurate in this case and insulting to those of us who have served and to those serving now.

ROBERT MARTIN
Pomona

Let him watch

Re "'13 Reasons Why' is still so very wrong," Opinion, July 25

Whatever merit there may be in the concern about the admittedly unproven influence that a specific depiction of suicide in "13 Reasons Why" may have had on "at-risk youths," ideally the issue would be one not of content but of access.

In spite of the genuine need to protect the psychologically vulnerable, I do not recognize any right of the nanny state to protect me from a show like "13 Reasons Why."

JIM JOHNSON
Whittier

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