

FBI TRIES TO REASSURE MUSLIMS

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“We are not the secret police,” Kenneth McCabe said. Hundreds of people in the Islamic Center audience watched him carefully.

“I am here to dispel rumors that we come in the middle of the night and take you away, and you’re never going to be seen again,” he said.

A burly, middle-aged, plainspoken man, McCabe is the special agent in charge of the FBI for West Virginia and western Pennsylvania. “We know at the FBI that all Muslims are not terrorists,” he said.

It was a recent Friday night. The Islamic Association had invited the community to an open house called “We Are One.” They handed out a program at the door that said, “Thank you for joining us today to show those who preach hatred and mistrust that America will not be divided along religious and ethnic lines.”

They attracted a full house. Agent McCabe was one of six non-Muslim speakers. Earlier speakers, including Gov. Bob Wise, had praised the many contributions of the Islamic community to the Kanawha Valley, the doctors, teachers, artists, professionals of all kinds. They spoke of reverence for life and said, “We’re all West Virginians and Americans.”

McCabe told the Muslims not to worry if an FBI agent knocks on the door. “We are going to begin interviewing people,” he said. The FBI might come to your house “to see if you have any information that will help the U.S. government,” or to let you know the FBI will vigorously prosecute hate crimes against Muslims. “Part of the reason is to eliminate you as any type of suspect.”

All over the room, people shifted in their chairs and glanced at each other. “We can’t just drive around the streets of the Charleston area and pick out a house and say, ‘Let’s go up and talk to them,’” McCabe assured them. “There has to be some reason.”

The FBI needs and wants your help, he said. “Some interviews will lead to others. Somebody might tell us, for instance, Mohammad over here may be suspicious or doing something.” He introduced the FBI agent for Southern West Virginia, Joe Ciccarelli. Tell Joe if you see anything odd or if you suspect a hate crime, he said.

As he spoke, visitors still trickled into the back of the meeting hall. Every chair was taken. Teen-agers jumped up to give visitors their seats. Democratic mayoral candidate Chris Smith arrived with his wife.

McCabe showed the crowd his FBI badge and ID card and advised them that they have a right to see the ID of anyone who wants to interview them. People sat quietly, no murmuring, no questions. Maybe they knew that, all over the United States, the FBI is interviewing Muslims, simply because they are Muslim. Kenneth McCabe didn’t dream up this idea. He’s following orders from Washington.

In West Virginia, he said, state and local police may help interview people. In other states, local police departments in several cities have already refused to take part in the interviews.

“The FBI is here to protect you,” he said. The crowd applauded politely as he sat down.

The emcee thanked him and said, “You can be sure the law-abiding members of this community will cooperate with you. At the same time, we will expect our civil rights to be protected.” People clapped again.

It was a profoundly uneasy moment, handled with grace.

The program resumed speed. The Islamic Center gave community service awards to Dr. Jamal Khan, a founder of Charleston Area Medical Center's open-heart bypass surgery program, and Dr. Badshah Wazir, Director of the South Charleston Cardiology Group. A speaker said violent Islamic fundamentalism violates Islam at its roots. Unitarian minister Mel Hoover thanked Agent McCabe for his effort to reassure, recalling the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and police harassment of protesters during the Civil Rights movement. He spoke of the circle of life that includes all people.

After the program, McCabe and most of the audience milled about, introduced themselves, and ate a buffet of international foods. The Patriot Act hung over the gathering like an unwelcome ghost.

McCabe said he wanted to reassure people. Given the Patriot Act, that task may be next to impossible. Passed in a congressional frenzy after Sept. 11, it greatly expanded government power to detain people (citizens or not), to wiretap, to look at e-mail and other computer communications, to get library and other personal records, and to search people's homes without their knowledge.

Under the Patriot Act, the federal government now can — and does — detain immigrants indefinitely if they are charged with any crime (writing a bad check, for instance). The Justice Department must simply say there are reasonable grounds to suspect the person threatens national security. The Justice Department does not have to prove the accusation, and it can use secret evidence. Lawyers for some immigrant detainees say they have not been allowed to see their clients.

Many people at the Islamic Center know this. They also know that citizens can be arrested if they are found to have supported — however unknowingly — an organization the Justice Department decides is supporting terrorists. They know there is a proposal afoot in the Bush administration that would allow the government to take the citizenship of such people.

Agent McCabe didn't write those laws. He said several times that he wanted to calm people's fears. But a ton of reassurance can't change the fact that the Bush administration apparently considers Muslims and Iraqis guilty until proven innocent, simply because they are Muslims or Iraqis.

The large turnout at the open house showed how many people in the Kanawha Valley share that concern. While horrifying international events spiral further out of control, this is something we can do here: Non-Muslims can take every chance to show support and appreciation for our Muslim neighbors who have given so much to the quality of life in this valley.

Long is the Gazette's writing coach.

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