

Don't look at the flash

By Greg Palast
gregpalast.com | September 8, 2004

On September 11, 2001, we Americans were the victims of a terrible attack. By September 12, we became the suspects. Not one single U.S. citizen hijacked a plane, yet President Bush and Attorney General John Ashcroft, through powers seized and codified in the USA PATRIOT Act, fingered 270 million of us for surveillance, for searches, for tracking, for watching. And who was going to play Anti-Santa, watching to see when we've been good or bad? A guy named Derek Smith. And that made September 11, 2001 Derek's lucky day.

Even before the spying work could begin, there were all those pieces of people to collect – tubes marked “DM” (for “Disaster Manhattan”) – from which his company, ChoicePoint Inc, would extract DNA for victim identification, work for which the firm would receive \$12 million from New York City's government. Maybe Smith, like the rest of us, grieved at the murder of innocent friends and countrymen. As for the 12-million-dollar corpse identification fee, that's chump change to the \$4 billion corporation Smith had founded only four years earlier in Alpharetta, Georgia.

Nevertheless, for Smith's ChoicePoint Inc., Ground Zero would become a profit center lined with gold. As the towers fell, ChoicePoint's stock rose; and from Ground Zero, contracts gushed forth from War on Terror fever. Why? Because this outfit is holding no less than 16 billion records on every living and dying being in the USA. They're the Little Brother with the filing system when Big Brother calls.

ChoicePoint's quick route to no-bid spy contracts was not impeded by the fact that the company did something for George W. Bush that the voters would not: select him as our president. Here's how they did it. Before the 2000 election, ChoicePoint unit Database Technologies, held a \$4 million no-bid contract under the control of Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris, to identify felons who had illegally registered to vote. The ChoicePoint outfit altogether fingered 94,000 Florida residents. As it turned out, less than 3,000 had a verifiable criminal record; almost everyone on the list had the right to vote.

The tens of thousands of “purged” citizens had something in common besides their innocence: The list was, in the majority, made up of African Americans and Hispanics, overwhelmingly Democratic voters whose only crime was V.W.B: Voting While Black. And

Don't look at the flash / 2

that little ethnic cleansing operation, conducted by Governor Jeb Bush's gang with ChoicePoint's aid, determined the race in which Harris named Bush the winner by 537 votes.

To say that ChoicePoint is in the "data" business is utterly to miss their market concept: These guys are in the Fear Industry. Secret danger lurks everywhere. Al Qaeda's just the tip of the iceberg. What about the pizza delivery boy? ChoicePoint hunted through a sampling of them and announced that 25 percent had only recently come out of prison. "What pizza do you like?" asks CEO Smith. "At what price? Are you willing to take the risk?"

War fever opened up a whole new market for the Fear Industry.

And now Mr. Smith wants your blood. ChoicePoint is the biggest supplier of DNA to the FBI's "CODIS" system. And, one company insider whispered to me, "Derek [Smith] told me that it is his hope to build a database of DNA samples from every person in the United States." For now, Smith keeps this scheme under wraps, fearing "resistance" from the public. Instead, Smith pushes "ChoicePoint Cares" – taking DNA samples to hunt for those missing kids on milk cartons. It's for, "the mothers of this country who are wrestling with threats" – you know, the pizza guy from Al Queda, the cult kidnapers. In other words, ChoicePoint's real product, like our President's, is panic.

In Hollywood, Jack Nicholson picked up the zeitgeist: "If I were an Arab American I would insist on being profiled. This is not the time for civil rights."

Maybe Jack's right: screw rights, we want safety.

But wait, Jack. We're both old farts who can remember the Cuban Missile Crisis. In 1962, the Russians were going to drop The Big One on us. But we didn't have to worry, Mrs. Gordon told us, if we just got under the desk, covered our necks. And she'd warned, it will all be OK as long as we, "Don't look at the flash!"

ChoicePoint's Smith admonishes that, if we'd only had his databases humming at the airports on September 11, the hijackers, who used their own names, would have been barred from boarding. However, experts inform me that Osama no longer checks in as "Mr. bin Laden," even at the cost of losing his frequent flyer miles.

ChoicePoint's miles of files, the FBI's CODIS system, taking off your shoes at the airport, Code Purple days, the whole new Star-Spangled KGB'ing of America is the new "Duck and Cover."

Thank you, ChoicePoint. Thank you, Mr. Ashcroft. Thank you, Mr. Bush. We're safe now, as long as we don't look at the flash!

Greg Palast is the author of the New York Times bestseller, "The Best Democracy Money Can Buy" and "Joker's Wild: Dubya's Trick Deck" – investigative regime change cards from Seven Stories Press.