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FRIENDS COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL LEGISLATION
... a Quaker lobby in the public interest

September 23, 2003

Re: Support HR 1157, Freedom to Read Protection Act

Dear Representative:

We, the undersigned religious organizations, write to solicit your support for the Freedom to Read Protection Act of 2003, HR 1157. This bill strengthens protections for the privacy of bookstore and library records and rolls back one of the dangerous provisions of the USA PATRIOT Act. HR 1157 enjoys bi-partisan co-sponsorship.

From a religious perspective, we believe that the freedom to have and explore private ideas is critical to both individual and national health. Everyone in the United States, including members of our faith organizations, must feel free to seek out books on religion, politics, law, health, or any subject they choose, without fear of government surveillance. Without the assurance that their reading choices will remain private, individuals may be reluctant to exercise their right to read freely - thus chilling this precious right. There can be no freedom of speech if there is no freedom to read.

Section 215 of the USA PATRIOT Act threatens bookstore and library privacy. Under section 215, FBI agents do not need to produce evidence to show "probable cause" for suspicion that a crime has been or will be committed. If the FBI believes that targeted information would be useful in protecting the nation from terrorist attack, they can search bookstore or library records, including the personal records of people who are not suspected of committing a crime or of having any knowledge of a crime. The FBI's request for an order authorizing the search is received by a secret court in a closed proceeding. The secret court must grant the request if the FBI has followed the procedural requirements for the warrant request. Because no notice is given to the library or bookstore of this application procedure, it is impossible for a bookseller or librarian to object on First Amendment grounds before the warrant is presented at the library or bookstore. Because section 215 contains a "gag" provision forbidding a bookseller or librarian from revealing that a search has occurred, the search may not be protested even after the fact.

Joanne Rains Warner: Clerk
 Edward F. Snyder: Executive Secretary Emeritus
 Florence C. Kimball: Legislative Education Secretary
 Bridget Molix: Leg

Stephen McNeil: Assistant Clerk
 Joe Volk: Executive Secretary
 Ned Stowe: Legislative Secretary

Elizabeth Hofmeister: Treasurer
 Arthur Meyer Boyd: Associate Executive Secretary
 Kathy Guthrie: Field Program Secretary

2:55PM
 via Wenzel-Danley: PRINT TIME
 SEP. 23. 2:57PM



Under HR 1157, law enforcement officials will still be able to subpoena bookstore and library records crucial to a terrorism investigation, but the courts will have authority to exercise their normal scrutiny in reviewing these requests. HR 1157 also establishes reporting requirements for appropriate congressional oversight of Justice Department actions arising from the USA PATRIOT Act, restoring a more appropriate balance of power between these branches of government.

We applaud the sponsors and co-sponsors of HR 1157. They have shown great courage by defending civil liberties during a time of crisis. We urge you to show your strong, public support for the Freedom to Read Protection Act, HR 1157. If you have not yet done so, please join the list of those co-sponsoring HR 1157, and urge Rep. Sensenbrenner, Chair of the House Judiciary Committee to hold the public hearings on the bill, as requested by its sponsors.

Sincerely,

American Baptist Churches USA
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Mennonite Central Committee U.S., Washington Office
Union of American Hebrew Congregations
Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations