

More than a bad week Community Comment: Mike Goldsby, May 23, 2013-05-20

It's been a bad couple of weeks for some basic, cherished rights. Freedom of the press and fair taxation are things we expect as Americans but current events prove that is not what we always get. The IRS unfairly targets Tea Party groups. The Justice Department secretly monitors newspaper offices.

Let's start with the IRS scandal. Most non-profits are 501 C 3. These are religious, educational and charitable organizations. The scandal focuses on 501 C 4 tax-free status: Corporations who claim to operate exclusively for the promotion of "social welfare." These organizations may inform the public on controversial subjects and attempt to influence legislation. These organizations are not permitted direct participation in political campaigns either for or against a candidate for public office. Organizations are not required to disclose their donors publicly. Spending from these organizations on political TV ads has exceeded spending from Super PACs. Applications for this status have tripled in the past two years.

In preparing for this comment, I read some of the tax code and I only got more confused. Heck, I may be a 501 C 4.

The Sunday New York Times had an in-depth article describing what went wrong in the Cincinnati IRS office. "While there are still many gaps in the story of how the I.R.S. scandal happened, the article painted "a muddled picture of an understaffed Cincinnati outpost that was alienated from the broader I.R.S. culture and given little direction. Overseen by a revolving cast of midlevel managers, stalled by miscommunication with I.R.S. lawyers and executives in Washington and confused about the rules they were enforcing, the Cincinnati specialists flagged virtually every application with Tea Party in its name." The Times says IRS review went beyond conservative groups as more than 400 organizations came under scrutiny.

But the IRS clearly targeted the Tea Party. And that is clearly wrong. To have the IRS targeting groups who are critical of the IRS is unacceptable.

It would be great if Congress simplified the tax code. But that may be unlikely, as many elected officials perceive they benefit from 501 C 4 money and campaigns.

Now onto illegal government wiretapping: Fox News reports "the Justice Department secretly obtained two months of telephone records of over 200 reporters and editors for The Associated Press in what the news cooperative's top executive called a 'massive and unprecedented intrusion' into how news organizations gather the news."

This massive secret search was not to stop a terrorist attack. It was apparently to discover who leaked information to AP about a foiled terrorist attack.

Obama's office claims no prior knowledge of either of these situations. That isn't very reassuring. Is it widespread corruption or bureaucratic incompetence? Which is worse? How did Nixon get re-elected?

This is Mike Goldsby for Community Comment