

# FALAFEL FORESIGHT

On December 19, 2005, just days after Risen and Lichtblau revealed the illegal domestic wiretap program, I wrote the following:

I'm proposing it's not an indirect link to Al Qaeda, that the NYT is using this language to shield the technical details (if these people were really linked to Al Qaeda, the FISA warrant would be a cinch). I'm proposing that it's a link of similarity. They find the communication patterns of a known Al Qaeda operative, and they start monitoring everyone who has similar communication patterns.

[snip]

Is it possible the dubious ties are as little as a fondness for a take-out joint favored by suspected Al Qaeda operatives?

Later, I envisioned the most ridiculous kind of food-based surveillance: falafel.

I've long suggested that they may have wrapped up folks who shopped the same falafel joints as genuine Al Qaeda targets (ut oh—Bill O'Reilly may be in trouble).

As you've no doubt heard, I was not being as clever as I thought I was being.

Like Hansel and Gretel hoping to follow their bread crumbs out of the forest, the FBI sifted through customer data collected by San Francisco-area grocery stores in 2005 and 2006, hoping that sales records of Middle Eastern food would lead to Iranian terrorists.

The idea was that a spike in, say,

falafelsales, combined with other data, would lead to Iranian secret agents in the south San Francisco-San Jose area.

One more relevant detail may be in order. In the NYT's earliest reporting on the warrantless wiretapping program, they described just one person suspected of being surveilled because of these crappy methods:

But they said most people targeted for N.S.A. monitoring have never been charged with a crime, including an Iranian-American doctor in the South who came under suspicion because of what one official described as dubious ties to Osama bin Laden.

Understand, the FBI program is surely different than the warrantless wiretap program. And when they say they're looking for "Iranian secret agents," it's as likely they're looking for Lebanese Hezbollah members as they are looking for Iranian doctors. But this does raise the questions about whether other surveillance programs are using such ludicrous bases for surveillance.