

FBI TELLS LIBRARIANS: “SSSSHHHHH!”

Remember when librarians used to be caricatured as stern matrons telling us all to shush up while we were at the library? That is, until they took on a front-line fight defending the civil liberties of Americans who just want to read books (or use computers). We all owe a debt to those librarians fighting against PATRIOT Act restrictions on free speech.

Which is why I'm not so sure it's a good idea for the FBI to make such a clumsy stand against free speech at the librarians' Midwinter Meeting tomorrow (h/t Momsrighthand) [note, the ALA article has been updated, but I'll keep the original]:

The attorney who represents FBI Supervisory Special Agent Bassem Youssef, chief of the Counterterrorism Division's Communications Analysis Unit, advised the American Library Association's Washington Office two days before the agent's scheduled January 12 speech at ALA's Midwinter Meeting at the Pennsylvania Convention Center in Philadelphia that the FBI had warned him against delivering the speech. Instead, Youssef would appear to answer "acceptable questions presented by members of the audience,"

The FBI has already gotten in trouble for trying to silence Special Agent Youssef. But apparently, they still don't want him to talk about problems with the FBI's counter-terrorism effort.

[F]ollowing a December 20 ALA press release that detailed the program, the FBI e-mailed Youssef January 3 and "expressed its displeasure at the proposed content of his presentation, and the viewpoints for which he would

raise at the conference.” Kohn added that the Bureau “explicitly took exception” to the idea that Youssef “is expected to discuss a number of critical failures within the FBI’s Counterterrorism program, which undermine basic constitutional rights of American citizens and threaten the effectiveness of America’s counterterrorism efforts.”

The FBI e-mail then issued a clear warning to Youssef against making such a presentation, noted Kohn, who explained that the agency also forwarded to Youssef a multi-page document setting forth various rules concerning pre-publication clearance of any potential speech and forbidding him to show the rules to anyone outside the agency. “The FBI does not want the general public to know the contents of the censorship provisions it unconstitutionally demands that its agents follow,” Kohn wrote, advising that Youssef would not be able to make the planned presentation.

Call me crazy, but this is just clumsy. I mean, I can see censoring someone giving a talk to DFH bloggers. But librarians? C’mon. They’re the respectable champions of civil liberties.