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FBI to Fire Dissident Agent

Veteran Criticized Hamas Probes

By John Mintz

Washington Post Staff Writer

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The FBI has moved to fire a veteran agent who alleged that the bureau had mishandled domestic investigations of the Islamic Resistance Movement, also known as Hamas, the Palestinian group designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. government.

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On Thursday, Robert Wright was ordered by superiors at an FBI counterterrorism command office in Washington to hand over his badge and weapon, was suspended and was told he would be fired within 30 days, said an official with Judicial Watch, a government watchdog group whose attorneys represent Wright. Wright was told he was being dismissed for, among other things, publicly discussing sensitive FBI matters in 2003, the official said.

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An FBI spokesman declined to comment, citing the confidentiality of bureau personnel matters.

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John Vincent, a former FBI agent who is the Midwest representative of Judicial Watch, said Wright was informed he was being suspended in part for public statements he made at a news conference in Washington in 2003, when he criticized the FBI's "pathetic" counterterrorism work.

Wright, who had investigated Hamas activities in this country as an agent in Chicago, had stated publicly as early as 2002 that he believed the FBI should prosecute Hamas activists in the United States, rather than simply keeping tabs on them in "intelligence" probes. In the last year, the Justice Department has filed criminal charges against some of those alleged Hamas associates.

Wright has been under disciplinary investigation for almost three years. He has two lawsuits pending against the FBI. One alleges that the FBI improperly released confidential information from his personnel file, and the other accuses the bureau of violating his rights of free expression by blocking him from discussing certain subjects in a book.

Yesterday, Sens. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa) and Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) sent FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III a letter repeating their support for Wright and expressing concern that the FBI was retaliating against him for his public statements.

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Don't fault the messenger

By Danielle Brian and Martin Edwin Andersen

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Imagine revolutionary patriot Paul Revere, exhausted from his midnight ride alerting his countrymen about the threat posed by an oppressive British army just over the horizon. Suddenly and without warning, he's knocked off his horse, charged with creating "publick disorder," and then declared insane — by the very people he was trying to warn.

The scenario seems farfetched, until you consider what is happening today to national-security whistleblowers — this nation's modern Paul Reveres — men and women who are finding that, even amid a war on terror, an embarrassed post-September 11 government bureaucracy would rather crush truth-tellers than admit its foibles.

Consider Robert G. Wright Jr., an outspoken agent in the FBI's Chicago field office.

Even before September 11, Mr. Wright had warned the bureau that money contributed by a militant Islamic terrorist cell had helped finance the 1998 al Qaeda bombing of two United States embassies, in which more than 200 people were killed. Through Mr. Wright's efforts, \$1.4 million was also seized from the terrorists before September 11.

However, a strong criminal case Mr. Wright and his peers were preparing against terrorist suspects was killed, the former federal prosecutor who handled the case later charged, either because of influence by Saudi Arabia or due to bureaucratic ineptness.

Then September 11 occurred. Within a month, the federal government officially identified an important financier for Osama bin Laden in Chicago. He was one of the very people whom the FBI had, months earlier, told Mr. Wright to stop investigating.

Concerned with the bureau's bumbling on this and other September 11-related cases, Mr. Wright went public with his criticism, charging that "the FBI allowed known terrorists, their co-conspirators and financiers, to operate and roam freely throughout the United States."

Embarrassed by the publicity, the FBI mounted a multi-pronged retaliation campaign against Mr. Wright that has involved phony investigations, lie-detector tests and even threats to prevent him from appearing on "The O'Reilly Factor." Documents surfaced by Sen. Charles Grassley showed that FBI supervisors intended to "take out" Mr. Wright for his whistleblowing.

Now they have acted on those threats. Last month, the bureau suspended Mr. Wright without pay, took away his gun and badge and told him he would be fired, according to his attorney at Judicial Watch. They even took away his bureau-issued car, leaving him stranded where he was on temporary assignment in Washington.

Early this month, Russ Tice, an intelligence analyst at the National Security Agency, similarly had his concerns swept under the rug. The supersecret government agency that conducts electronic eavesdropping and code-breaking informed Mr. Tice that his security clearance was being revoked and that he was being fired.

Mr. Tice, a highly praised veteran of four U.S. intelligence agencies, ran into trouble after