

Banks, Credit Card and Financial Firms are Searching Your Purchases

Description

[Authored by Mark Tapscott via The Epoch Times](#) (emphasis ours),

Faith leaders and religious liberty advocates are up in arms over news that the federal government encouraged banks and other financial institutions to search customers' private accounts using the search term "religious texts."



Tony Perkins (C), president of the Family Research Council, speaks during an interfaith roundtable on the Chinese Communist Party's threat to religious freedom in Washington on July 12, 2023. (Madalina Vasiliu/The Epoch Times)

The "religious texts" search term was among those federal officials asked financial institutions to use following the Jan. 6, 2021, breach of the U.S. Capitol, a congressional source with direct knowledge confirmed to The Epoch Times on Jan. 18.

Other terms that were asked to use in the searches included "MAGA" and "Trump," according to the House Judiciary Committee. Federal officials at the Department of Justice and the Treasury Department sought the data from such searches as part of their investigation of the events of Jan. 6, 2021.

Religious liberty advocates interviewed by The Epoch Times were unanimous in condemning the searches, which were conducted without judicially authorized search warrants.

"This is beyond alarming," Family Research Council President Tony Perkins told The Epoch Times. "If we did a word search in history of the type of activities the Biden administration is engaged in, it would

return words like ‘KGB,’ ‘totalitarian,’ ‘repressive,’ ‘anti-democratic,’ and ‘grave threat to freedom.’”

Family Research Council is a Washington-based nonprofit advocacy group that works on behalf of traditional values, including and especially defense of the family and religious freedom.

“The last place you would anticipate this kind of government intrusion into freedom of speech is America and yet it is rife with this administration and with the ‘deep state,’” Liberty Counsel founder and Chairman Mat Staver told The Epoch Times.

“It is a very serious concern and it should be a serious concern, no matter your political beliefs because if this is permitted, then it just depends on who is in power. This is what despotic governments do to suppress people that they don’t agree with,” he said.

Mr. Staver’s organization, Liberty Counsel, is an Orlando, Florida-based nonprofit religious liberty defense foundation.

‘Mockery of Our Laws’

Kelly Shackelford, president, CEO, and chief counsel for the Plano, Texas-based First Liberty Institute, told The Epoch Times the searches exposed by the House panel represent a threat to religious freedom.

“It’s outrageous and frankly chilling that the federal government may be urging banks to monitor Americans for exercising their religious freedom by simply purchasing a Bible or other religious text,” Mr. Shackelford said.

“Weaponizing the federal government against religious Americans freely exercising their constitutionally protected freedom is outrageous and a danger to all our freedoms. It makes a mockery of our laws. When religious people are attacked and religious freedom is not upheld, all other civil liberties—including economic freedom—soon start crumbling.”

“This news should serve as a wake-up call for every American,” warned Jeremy Tedesco, senior vice president of corporate engagement for Alliance Defending Freedom. “The revelation that the government is working with financial institutions to flag everyday American citizens as ‘threats’ because they shop at Cabelas, Dick’s Sporting Goods, or buy religious texts is terrifying.

“No one should live in fear that law enforcement or a financial service provider will flag their account based on the exercise of their constitutionally protected rights.”

House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan (R-Ohio) said in a Jan. 17 statement that the searches were sought by the Department of the Treasury’s Office of Stakeholder Integration and Engagement in the Strategic Operations of the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN), in conjunction with the FBI.



Rep. Jim Jordan (R-Ohio) accused the Department of Justice’s Civil Rights Division of politically based prosecutions while questioning U.S. Assistant Attorney General Kristen Clarke during a House hearing about “Oversight of the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division” in Washington on Dec. 5, 2023. (Screenshot via NTD)

Mr. Jordan [wrote a Jan. 17 letter](#) to Noah Bishoff, the former FinCEN director who is now the anti-money laundering officer for Plaid Inc., a San Francisco digital financial platform developer and marketer.

“According to this analysis, FinCEN warned financial institutions of ‘extremism’ indicators that include ‘transportation charges, such as bus tickets, rental cars, or plane tickets, for travel areas with no apparent purpose,’ or ‘the purchase of books (including religious texts) and subscriptions to other media containing extremist views,” Mr. Jordan wrote.

“In other words, FinCEN used large financial institutions to comb through the private transactions of their customers for suspicious charges on the basis of protected political and religious expression.”

Officials’ Testimony Sought

Mr. Bishoff was asked to provide testimony to the House Judiciary panel about the searches, as was Peter Sullivan, senior private sector partner for outreach in the Strategic Partner Engagement Section of the FBI.

“Freedom of Religion is a fundamental right enshrined in the Constitution,” Mr. Jordan told The Epoch Times. “It should frighten every American that the federal government is watching people based on their purchases. This is as wrong as it gets and we will continue to expose this blatant attack on faith and civil liberties.”

In a Jan. 17 letter to FBI Director Christopher Wray, Mr. Jordan explained that Mr. Sullivan’s testimony “will help to inform the [House Judiciary] Committee and Select Subcommittee [on the Weaponization

of the Federal Government] about the FBI's mass accumulation and use of Americans' private information without legal process; the FBI's protocols, if any, to safeguard Americans' privacy and constitutional rights in the receipt and use of such information; and the FBI's general engagement with the private sector on law-enforcement matters.”

Congressional leaders also told The Epoch Times the searches warrant further investigation and corrective action.



FBI Director Christopher Wray looks over notes as he arrives for a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington on May 10, 2023. (Drew Angerer/Getty Images)

House Majority Whip Tom Emmer (R-Minn.) also commented.

“The Biden administration is bringing back ‘Operation Chokepoint’ from the Obama-Biden era to weaponize our financial system against their political opponents. House Republicans, under the leadership of Chairman Jordan and the House Judiciary Committee, will not tolerate this un-American abuse of power.” Mr. Emmer said.

He was referring to a Department of Justice investigation in 2013 of firearms dealers, payday lenders, and other businesses thought to be vulnerable to money laundering.

Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) told The Epoch Times that **“digging through American citizens’ private financial transactions, based on political phrases, is a clear weaponization of the federal government and those responsible must be held responsible.”**

Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas) called the searches “outrageous” and claimed “the Biden administration is using federal law enforcement to engage in financial surveillance of Americans. ... Shockingly, the government is even monitoring people for purchasing religious texts like the Bible. This is an Orwellian invasion of privacy, and it should have never happened in the United States. Biden’s bureaucrats running this horrendous financial surveillance system must be held accountable.”

Similarly, Sen. Ted Budd (R-N.C.) told The Epoch Times: “This is yet another example of the federal government being weaponized against Joe Biden’s political opposition, as well as people of faith. This sort of activity is highly concerning and warrants further investigation. I applaud the House Judiciary Committee for digging into this issue and I look forward to investigators exposing and rooting out this misconduct.”

Tactics of Marxism

Shea Bradley-Farrell is an international development professional and president of the Washington-based Counterpoint Institute for Policy, Research, and Education. She told The Epoch Times that the searches are typical of the control measures used by totalitarian regimes to counter dissidents and other groups not approved by the authorities.

“Weaponizing the federal government against private citizens for their political or religious beliefs is straight out of the playbook of Marxism, and was also used to identify, crush, and control the occupied peoples under the communist Soviet Union,” Ms. Bradley-Farrell said.

“As I explain in my book, ‘Last Warning to the West,’ these are totalitarian, police-state tactics used to impose ‘docility, discipline and controllability of subject populations. These are warrantless searches that violate the Fourth Amendment.”

A spokesman for Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen didn’t respond by press time to a request by The Epoch Times for comment.