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Jim DeFede/Commentary

## **Threat to liberty at FTAA worth a second look**

This weekend the PBS program Now with Bill Moyers airs a segment on the protests in Miami during the Free Trade Area of the Americas summit in November. I haven't seen the 20-minute piece, but the producers said they were interested in examining the protests as part of a larger theme the show has dealt with in recent months, the criminalization of dissent.

The criminalization of dissent.

Four words that capture what I've clumsily tried to write about.

The criminalization of dissent is precisely what took place in Miami.

There is a popular view in Miami that a hemispheric trade agreement would benefit this city and create as many as 89,000 new jobs in Florida. And all Miami had to do was avoid the mayhem Seattle experienced when it hosted a World Trade Organization meeting in 1999.

### **NEW ORDINANCE PASSED**

The Miami City Commission helped the police, passing an ordinance just prior to the summit that civil liberty advocates said narrowed free speech and the right of assembly. During a hearing earlier this month, U.S. District Judge Donald Graham, said: ``Frankly, I think if anyone, any judge, looks at the law and looks at the ordinance, the result is pretty apparent. It appears as though the statute is not constitutional."

Of course, many folks in Miami couldn't care less if the ordinance is unconstitutional because they assume it will never affect them.

We cherish our own rights but are cavalier about the rights of others, especially those who are different, either because they look different or they hold unpopular beliefs or they are considered an outsider. It's OK if we enact laws targeting these people because we tell ourselves those in authority will only go after bad people. We call it a necessary evil.

### **UNCHECKED POWER**

We've seen this debate in regard to racial profiling and the Patriot Act. As the FTAA once again proves, the police are not very adept at sorting out the good guys from the bad. And that unchecked power, no matter how well intended, is the greatest threat to our liberty.

In Miami we gave the police a club and they wielded it indiscriminately, striking seniors and

retirees, union members and environmentalists, reporters and innocent bystanders. No matter how legitimate your belief or your actions, if you were downtown during the FTAA, you were viewed with suspicion, forced to walk past riot-clad officers and treated as if you were doing something wrong.

You were made to feel un-American.

As The Herald reported Sunday, of the 234 people who were arrested, a third have had their charges dropped, dismissed or been acquitted; another third have had their prosecutions deferred or adjudication withheld -- which almost always leads to the charges being dismissed -- and the final third are awaiting court dates.

Number of convictions: One.

### THE COST OF CITY'S IMAGE

The police cost is now estimated at \$23.9 million, most of it for overtime and to buy new equipment, including uniforms and weapons.

Here's a thought: Anyone else think the police used the FTAA hysteria to go on an unnecessary, taxpayer-financed shopping spree to buy millions of dollars in gadgets and gear?

And while you ponder that, see if this makes sense: To avoid Seattle's \$3 million in property damage, we spent \$23.9 million on security.

Angel Calzadilla, executive assistant to Miami police Chief John Timoney, noted: ``You can't put a price tag on the damage to the city's image that we prevented by being out there."

Unfortunately, Miami's image took a major hit during the FTAA. Mayor Manny Diaz's "Miami Model" is now synonymous with the creation of a police state where cops in riot gear stand over bloody protesters. But don't take my word for it, watch for yourself.

The PBS program Now with Bill Moyers airs across the country on Friday and in South Florida at 10:30 a.m. Sunday on WPBT-PBS 2.