

San Francisco Chronicle

EDITORIAL

Not about free speech

Friday, March 27, 2009

"I am a victim of free-speech suppression," Maryam Khajavi, 20, of Pinole proclaimed in front of a federal courtroom in San Jose last week. Actually, federal authorities did not charge Khajavi, Joseph Buddenberg, 25, Adriana Stumpo, 23, and Nathan Pope, 26, for violating the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act because of Washington doesn't like what these activists think, or because the federal government doesn't agree with their opposition to animal research. The federal law is designed, not to suppress political thought, but to end campaigns of violence and intimidation against scientific researchers.

All four activists - who now call themselves the "AETA 4" - have pleaded not guilty and will have their day in court, as is their due. If they can establish that they merely criticized Berkeley and UC Santa Cruz researchers, they should not be convicted.

But if prosecutors establish that the AETA 4 distributed the professors' personal information and waged a campaign to encourage other activists to attack and threaten researchers with physical violence, by instilling in them a "reasonable fear of death or serious bodily injury," then they have crossed the line. According to the FBI, members of the group distributed flyers with the home addresses of researchers' homes. A few days later, the homes of two UC Santa Cruz researchers were firebombed.

"We had a family that was attacked in their home" Santa Cruz Police Chief Howard Skerry told The Chronicle. "That's the key here."

At least two of the AETA 4 once were UCSC students. They ought to know the difference between free speech and encouraging firebombing. If they cannot distinguish, they may soon learn the answer: The difference can mean up to five years in prison.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/03/27/ED8F16MC0N.DTL>

This article appeared on page **A - 11** of the San Francisco Chronicle