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## The Making of a Global Security State

By Tom Engelhardt

June 16, 2013

As happens with so much news these days, the Edward Snowden revelations about National Security Agency (NSA) spying and just how far we've come in the building of a surveillance state have swept over us 24/7 – waves of leaks, videos, charges, claims, counterclaims, skullduggery, and government threats. When a flood sweeps you away, it's always hard to find a little dry land to survey the extent and nature of the damage. Here's my attempt to look beyond the daily drumbeat of this developing story (which, it is promised, will go on for weeks, if not months) and identify five urges essential to understanding the world Edward Snowden has helped us glimpse.

### 1. The Urge to be Global

Corporately speaking, globalization has been ballyhooed since at least the 1990s, but in governmental terms only in the twenty-first century has that globalizing urge fully infected the workings of the American state itself. It's become common since 9/11 to speak of a "national security state." But if a week of ongoing revelations about NSA surveillance practices has revealed anything, it's that the term is already grossly outdated. Based on what we now know, we should be talking about an American global security state.

Much attention has, understandably enough, been lavished on the phone and other metadata about American citizens that the NSA is now sweeping up and about the ways in which such activities may be abrogating the First and Fourth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution. Far less attention has been paid to the ways in which the NSA (and other U.S. intelligence outfits) are sweeping up global data in part via the just-revealed Prism and other surveillance programs.

Sometimes, naming practices are revealing in themselves, and the National Security Agency's key data mining tool, capable in March 2013 of gathering "97 billion pieces of intelligence from computer networks worldwide," has been named "boundless informant." If you want a sense of where the U.S. Intelligence Community imagines itself going, you couldn't ask for a better hint than that word "boundless." It seems that for our spooks, there are, conceptually speaking, no limits left on this planet.

Today, that "community" seeks to put not just the U.S., but the world fully under its penetrating gaze. By now, the first "heat map" has been published showing where such information is being sucked up from monthly: Iran tops the list (14 billion pieces of intelligence); then come Pakistan (13.5 billion), Jordan (12.7 billion), Egypt (7.6 billion), and India (6.3 billion). Whether you realize this or not, even for a superpower that has unprecedented numbers of military bases scattered across the planet and has divided the world into six military commands, this represents something new under the sun. The only question is what?

The twentieth century was the century of "totalitarianisms." We don't yet have a name, a term, for the surveillance structures Washington is building in this century, but there can be no question that, whatever the present constraints on the system, "total" has something to do with it and that we are being ushered into a new world. Despite the recent leaks, we still undoubtedly have a very limited picture of just what the present American surveillance world really looks like and what it plans for our future. One thing is clear, however: the ambitions behind it are staggering and global.

In the classic totalitarian regimes of the previous century, a secret police/surveillance force attempted, via every imaginable method, including informers, wire tappers, torture techniques, imprisonment, and so on to take total control of a national environment, to turn every citizen's life into the equivalent of an open book, or more accurately a closed, secret file lodged somewhere in that police system. The most impressive of these efforts, the most global, was the Soviet one simply because the USSR was an imperial power with a set of disparate almost-states – those SSRs of the Caucasus and Central Asia – within its borders, and a series of Eastern European satellite states under its control as well. None of the twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, however, ever imagined doing the same thing on a genuinely global basis. There was no way to do so.

Washington's urge to take control of the global communications environment, lock, stock, and chat room, to gather its "data" – billions and billions of pieces of it – and via inconceivably powerful computer systems, mine and arrange it, find patterns in it, and so turn the world into a secret set of connections, represents a remarkable development. For the first time, a great power wants to know, up close and personal, not just what its own citizens are doing, but those of distant lands as well: who they are communicating with, and how, and why, and what they are buying, and where they are travelling, and who they are bumping into (online and over the phone).

Until recently, once you left the environs of science fiction, that was simply beyond imagining. You could certainly find precursors for such a development in, for instance, the Cold War intelligence community's urge to create a global satellite system that would bring every inch of

the planet under a new kind of surveillance regime, that would map it thoroughly and identify what was being mapped down to the square inch, but nothing so globally up close and personal.

The next two urges are intertwined in such a way that they might be thought as a single category: your codes and theirs.

## **2. The Urge to Make You Transparent**

The urge to possess you, or everything that can be known about you, has clearly taken possession of our global security state. With this, it's become increasingly apparent, go other disturbing trends. Take something seemingly unrelated: the recent Supreme Court decision that allows the police to take a DNA swab from an arrestee (if the crime he or she is charged with is "serious"). Theoretically, this is being done for "identification" purposes, but in fact it's already being put to other uses entirely, especially in the solving of separate crimes.

If you stop to think about it, this development, in turn, represents a remarkable new level of state intrusion on private life, on your self. It means that, for the first time, in a sure-to-widen set of circumstances, the state increasingly has access not just – as with NSA surveillance – to your Internet codes and modes of communication, but to your most basic code of all, your DNA. As Justice Antonin Scalia put it in his dissent in the case, "Make no mistake about it: As an entirely predictable consequence of today's decision, your DNA can be taken and entered into a national DNA database if you are ever arrested, rightly or wrongly, and for whatever reason." Can global DNA databases be far behind?

If your DNA becomes the possession of the state, then you are a transparent human being at the most basic level imaginable. At every level, however, the pattern, the trend, the direction is the same (and it's the same whether you're talking about the government or giant corporations). Increasingly, access to you, your codes, your communications, your purchases, your credit card transactions, your location, your travels, your exchanges with friends, your tastes, your likes and dislikes is what's wanted – for what's called your "safety" in the case of government and your business in the case of corporations.

Both want access to everything that can be known about you, because who knows until later what may prove the crucial piece of information to uncover a terrorist network or lure in a new network of customers. They want everything, at least, that can be run through a system of massive computers and sorted into patterns of various potentially useful kinds. You are to be, in this sense, the transparent man or transparent woman. Your acts, your life patterns, your rights, your codes are to be an open book to them – and increasingly a closed book to you. You are to be their secret and that "you" is an ever more global one.

## **3. The Urge to Make Themselves Opaque**

With this goes another reality. They are to become ever less accessible, ever more impenetrable, ever less knowable to you (except in the forms in which they would prefer you to know them). None of their codes or secrets are to be accessed by you on pain of imprisonment. Everything in the government – which once was thought to be "your" government – is increasingly

disappearing into a professional universe of secrecy In 2011, the last year for which figures are available, the government classified 92 million documents And they did so on the same principle that they use in collecting seemingly meaningless or harmless information from you: that only in retrospect can anyone know whether a benign-looking document might prove anything but Better to deny access to everything.

In the process, they are finding new ways of imposing silence on you, even when it comes to yourself Since 2001, for instance, it has become possible for the FBI to present you with a National Security Letter which forces you to turn over information to them, but far more strikingly gags you from ever mentioning publicly that you got such a letter Those who have received such letters (and 15,000 of them were issued in 2012) are legally enjoined from discussing or even acknowledging what's happening to them; their lives, that is, are no longer theirs to discuss If that isn't Orwellian, what is?

President Obama offered this reassurance in the wake of the Snowden leaks: the National Security Agency, he insisted, is operating under the supervision of all three branches of the government In fact, the opposite could be said to be true All three branches, especially in their oversight roles, have been brought within the penumbra of secrecy of the global security state and so effectively coopted or muzzled This is obviously true with our ex-professor of Constitutional law and the executive branch he presides over, which has in recent years been ramping up its own secret operations.

When it comes to Congress, the people's representatives who are to perform oversight on the secret world have been presented with the equivalent of National Security Letters; that is, when let in on some of the secrets of that world, they find they can't discuss them, can't tell the American people about them, can't openly debate them in Congress In public sessions with Congress, we now know that those who run our most secret outfits, if pushed to the wall by difficult questions, will as a concession respond in the "least untruthful manner" possible, as Director of National Intelligence James Clapper put it last week

Given the secret world's control over Congress, representatives who are horrified by what they've learned about our government's secrecy and surveillance practices, like Democratic Senators Ron Wyden and Mark Udall, can only hint at their worries and fears They can, in essence, wink at you, signal to you in obscure ways that something is out of whack, but they can't tell you directly. Secrecy, after all.

Similarly, the judiciary, that third branch of government and other body of oversight, has, in the twenty-first century, been fully welcomed into the global security state's atmosphere of total secrecy So when the surveillance crews go to the judiciary for permission to listen in on the world, they go to a secret court, a Foreign Intelligence Surveillance (FISA) court, locked within that secret world It, in turn, notoriously rubberstamps whatever it is they want to do, evidently offering no resistance whatsoever to their desires (Of the 6,556 electronic surveillance requests submitted to the court in Obama's first term in office, for instance, only one was denied.) In addition, unlike any other court in America, we, the American people, the transparent and ignorant public, can know next to nothing about it And you know perfectly well why: the overriding needs of secrecy.

What, though, is the point of "oversight" if you can't do anything other than what that secret world wants you to do?

We are, in other words, increasingly open to them and they are increasingly closed to us

#### **4. The Urge to Expand**

As we've known at least since Dana Priest and William Arkin published their stunning series, "Top Secret America," in the *Washington Post* in 2010, the U.S. Intelligence Community has expanded post-9/11 to levels unimaginable even in the Cold War era. Then, of course, it faced another superpower, not a small set of *jihadis* largely located in the backlands of the planet. It now exists on, as Arkin says, an "industrial scale." And its urge to continue growing, to build yet more structures for surveillance, including a vast \$2 billion NSA repository in Bluffdale, Utah, that will be capable of holding an almost unimaginable yottabyte of data, is increasingly written into its DNA.

For this vast, restless, endless expansion of surveillance of every sort and at every level, for the nearly half-million or possibly far more private contractors, aka "digital Blackwater," now in the government surveillance business – about 70% of the national intelligence budget reportedly goes to the private sector these days – and the nearly five million Americans with security clearances (1.4 million with top security clearances, more than a third of them private contractors), the official explanation is "terrorism." It matters little that terrorism as a phenomenon is one of the lesser dangers Americans face in their daily lives and that, for some of the larger ones, ranging from food-borne illnesses to cars, guns, and what's now called "extreme weather," no one would think about building vast bureaucratic structures shrouded in secrecy, funded to the hilt, and offering Americans promises of ultimate safety.

Terrorism certainly rears its ugly head from time to time and there's no question that the fear of some operation getting through the vast U.S. security net drives the employees of our global security state. As an explanation for the phenomenal growth of that state, however, it simply doesn't hold water. In truth, compared to the previous century, U.S. enemies are remarkably scarce on this planet. So forget the official explanation and imagine our global-security-state-in-the-making in the grips of a kind of compulsive disorder in which the urge to go global, make the most private information of the citizen everywhere the property of the American state, and expand surveillance endlessly simply trumps any other way of doing things.

In other words, they can't help themselves. The process, the phenomenon, has them by the throat, so much so that they can imagine no other way of being. In this mood, they are paving the way for a new global security – or rather insecurity – world. They are, for instance, hiking spending on "cybersecurity," have already secretly launched the planet's first cyberwar, are planning for more of them, intend to dominate the future cyber-landscape in a staggering fashion, continue to gather global data of every sort on a massive scale, and more generally are acting in ways that they would consider criminal if other countries engaged in them.

#### **5. The Urge to Leak**

The massive leaks of documents by Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden have few precedents in American history Daniel Ellsberg's Pentagon Papers leak is their only obvious predecessor They are not, however, happenstances of our moment They are signs of what's to come If, in surveillance terms, the urge to go global and impose ultimate secrecy on both the state's secrets and yours, to prosecute whistleblowers to the maximum (at this point usually via the Espionage Act or, in the case of Manning, via the charge of "aiding the enemy," and with calls of "treason" already in the air when it comes to Snowden), it's natural that the urge to leak will rise as well.

If the surveillance state has reached an industrial level of operations, and ever more secrets are being brought into computer systems, then vast troves of secrets exist to be revealed, already cached, organized, and ready for the plucking If the security state itself goes global, then the urge to leak will go global, too.

In fact, it already has It's easy to forget that WikiLeaks was originally created not just for American secrets but any secrets Similarly, Manning uploaded his vast trove of secrets from Iraq, and Snowden, who had already traveled the world in the service of secrecy, leaked to an American columnist living in Brazil and writing for a British newspaper His flight to Hong Kong and dream of Icelandic citizenship could be considered another version of the globalizing impulse

Rest assured, they will not be the last An all-enveloping atmosphere of secrecy is not a natural state of being Just look at us individually We love to tell stories about each other Gossiping is one of the most basic of human activities Revealing what others don't know is an essential urge The urge, that is, to open it all up is at least as powerful as the urge to shut it all down.

So in our age, considering the gigantism of the U.S. surveillance and intelligence apparatus and the secrets it holds, it's a given that the leak, too, will become more gigantic, that leaked documents will multiply in droves, and that resistance to regimes of secrecy and the invasion of private life that goes with them will also become more global It's hard from within the U.S. to imagine the shock in Pakistan, or Germany, or India, on discovering that your private life may now be the property of the U.S. government (Imagine for a second the reaction here if Snowden had revealed that the Pakistani or Iranian or Chinese government was gathering and storing vast quantities of private emails, texts, phone calls, and credit card transactions from American citizens. The uproar would have been staggering.)

As a result of all this, we face a strangely contradictory future in which ever more draconian regimes of secrecy will confront the urge for ever greater transparency President Obama came into office promising a "sunshine" administration that would open the workings of the government to the American people He didn't deliver, but Bradley Manning, Edward Snowden, and other leakers have, and no matter how difficult the government makes it to leak or how hard it cracks down on leakers, the urge is almost as unstoppable as the urge not to be your government's property.

You may have secrets, but you are not a secret – and you know it.