

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/sns-201306261730--tms--rkoehlerctnbk-a20130627-20130627,0,6007928,print.column>

The naked empire

Robert Koehler

6/27/2013

Certainly Edward Snowden's crime is one of public relations. In this day and age, power ain't just jackboots, tanks and missiles. What he did by outing the NSA and its gargantuan surveillance operation was mess hugely with the American image -- the American brand -- with its irresistible combination of might and right.

That's the nature of his "treason." The secret he gave away was pretty much the same one the little boy blurted out in Hans Christian Andersen's tale: "The emperor has no clothes!" That is, the government's security industry isn't devoted, with benevolent righteousness, to protecting the American public. Instead, it's obsessively irrational, bent on accumulating data on every phone call we make. It's a berserk spy machine, seemingly to no sane end. How awkward.

For instance, the government of Hong Kong, in refusing to extradite Snowden as per the Obama administration's request, explained in its refusal letter that it has "formally written to the U.S. government requesting clarification on reports about the hacking of computer systems in Hong Kong by U.S. government agencies. It will follow up on the matter, to protect the legal rights of people of Hong Kong."

In other words, sorry, Naked Empire. We're not going to do what you ask, and by the way, we have some issues with your behavior we'd like to discuss.

This is not the sort of insolence the world's only superpower wants to hear, and it's Snowden's fault, along with other whistleblowers who preceded him, some of whom, such as Bradley Manning, are enduring harsh consequences for their truth-telling. Traitors, all of them -- at least as far as the government is concerned, because, when you strip away the public relations mask, the primary interest of government is the perpetuation of power. And anyone who interferes with that perpetuation, even, or especially, in the name of principle, is a "security risk."

Incredibly, so much of the Fourth Estate goes along with this, aligning itself with the raw, unarticulated interests of power -- with the idea that security equals the status quo. Mainstream coverage of the Snowden affair assumes that a crime has been committed and has no further interest in that aspect of the story: a crime is a crime. The unspoken assumption is that the government protects us by doing whatever it does, and we don't really need to know the details. We just need to round up the transgressors and bring them to justice, because this, rather than the upholding of some sort of principle independent of raw power, is what constitutes the "national interest."

The privileged social position of the media is based on the idea that it's beholden first and foremost to principle and speaks truth to power, not that it's a glib collaborator with power, but that old saw has been on the wane for decades. It's just one of many principles that consumer culture seems to have given up on. (Nobody, for instance, seems to worry that "Christmas has gotten too commercial" anymore, either.)

Outside the mainstream, there has, of course, been excellent critical analysis both of Snowden's revelations and the mainstream media's snarky dismissal of same, but one assumption strikes me as largely unexamined: that the U.S. government essentially has the power to do whatever it wants, independent of the citizenry living under its auspices, and that our choices are either to go along with it or rail angrily against it. But maybe we have other options as well.

Gene Sharp, the extraordinary historian and theorist of nonviolent power, writes in "Power and Struggle: The Nature and Control of Political Power":

"Basically, there appear to be two views of the nature of power. One can see people as dependent upon the good will, the decisions and the support of their government or any other hierarchical system to which they belong. Or, conversely, one can see that government or system dependent on the people's good will, decisions and support.

"One can see the power of a government as emitted from the few who stand at the pinnacle of command. Or one can see that power, in all governments, as continually rising from many parts of the society. One can also see power as self-perpetuating, durable, not easily or quickly controlled or destroyed. Or political power can be viewed as fragile, always dependent for its strength and existence upon replenishment of its sources, by the cooperation of a multitude of institutions and people -- cooperation which may or may not continue."

Indeed, Snowden, Manning and other whistleblowers have demonstrated the fragility of governmental power with their very actions. Hence the government's kneejerk response: They're traitors! They disobeyed and must be punished, because any unofficial leakage of government policy is, by definition, bad for security. Of course the security in question is the security of those in power. The belief that their security is our security is the link that must be broken. As Sharp points out, we don't automatically owe those in power our good will.

Tim Wise, in an excellent essay putting the NSA revelations into context, writes: "Maybe it is time to remind ourselves that the only things worse than what this government and its various law enforcement agencies do in secret, are the things they've been doing blatantly, openly, but only to some, for a long time now."

From a genocidal war against the continent's original inhabitants to the institution of slavery to Jim Crow . . . to Vietnam, Agent Orange, the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, shock and awe bombing, torture, ecocide, drone warfare . . . to the millions of people trapped in our prison gulag . . . the agenda of empire has been going on, with unquestioning public support, for far too long. What the empire fears most is the day that it can no longer take this support for granted. That day is coming.