

# Big Brother in the “Big Apple”: Encircling Manhattan with thousands of surveillance cameras

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New York’s Mass Surveillance Plan Fast-Tracked by the NYPD. Mukasey Hands FBI Broad New Powers

*Last month Antifascist Calling [reported](#) on a scheme by the New York City Police Department (NYPD) to encircle Manhattan with thousands of surveillance cameras and sensors that would photograph all vehicles entering the city. Information captured by this intrusive system would be stored in a huge database for an undisclosed period of time. That plan is now moving forward with a vengeance.*

The Lower Manhattan Security Initiative (LMSI) and a related program, Operation Sentinel, are modeled after London’s so-called “Ring of Steel.” In London, roads entering the city are narrowed and have tight serpentine curves that force drivers to slow down and be recorded by CCTV cameras. Typically, such roads have concrete or reinforced plastic medians with a sentry box where police stand guard and monitor traffic flows. Following the July 7, 2005 terrorist attacks in London, security has been stepped up, with occasional spot checks by machine-gun toting police of cars and trucks entering the security cordon.

As it now stands, LMSI would link a matrix of 3,000 public and private surveillance cameras for monitoring and tracking vehicles and pedestrians south of Canal Street, the city’s financial hub. Other features of the system include mobile roadblocks that could swivel into place and block off any given street to traffic.

But as Durham University geographer Stephen Graham argues, these intrusive projects presuppose an “inside” and “outside” within a militarized urban space. Graham [writes](#),

In a world of intensifying transnational migration, transport, capital and media flows ... such attempts at constructing a mutually exclusive binary—a securitized ‘inside’ enclosing the urban places of the US Empire’s ‘homeland’, and an urbanizing ‘outside’, where US military power can pre-emptively attack places deemed sources of ‘terrorist’ threats—are inevitably both ambivalent and ridden with contradictions. They rest alongside the ratcheting-up of state surveillance and repression against Others targeted **within** US cities and society. They are paralleled ... by military strategies which increasingly treat the ‘inside’ spaces within the US and the ‘foreign’ ones in the rest of the world as a single, integrated, ‘battlespace’ prone to the rapid movements of ‘terrorist’ threats into the geographical and urban heartlands of US power at any instant. And they obscure the complex geographies and political economies of ‘primitive accumulation’ which closely tie predatory post-war ‘reconstruction’ and oil contracts in Iraq, and homeland security contracts in US cities, to the same cartel of Bush-friendly oil companies, defence and

security contractors and 'private military corporations.' ("Cities and the 'War on Terror'," International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, Volume 30.2, June 2006, pp. 255-276)

As I have frequently reported, "homeland security" corporations and a related complex of right-wing think tanks and terrorism "specialists" drawn from academia and the media have sprung up across the U.S. Empire's urban "battlespace" like so-many genetically-modified weeds.

Armed with a (highly-profitable) brief to "keep America safe," the net result has been the strangling of democratic processes and institutions. While its corollary, lack of accountability and state criminality, are the built-in features of a "war on terror" promulgated by an illegitimate regime that operates privately and secretly and which demands only *silence* from a terrorized and compliant population.

In light of recent moves to securitize New York's financial district as a first step towards militarizing the city as a whole, Operation Sentinel would photograph the license plates of every car and truck entering Manhattan across bridges or through tunnels. Under the proposal, radiation sensors would scan every vehicle for nuclear materials which could potentially be used in manufacturing a "dirty bomb."

However, as I previously [reported](#) the technology to do so does not exist. Indeed, a recent [story](#) in *The Washington Post* confirms my initial assessment that Operation Sentinel is little more than a corporatist scam.

Advanced Spectroscopic Portal (ASP) monitors designed by major defense contractors Raytheon, Thermo Electron and Canberra Industries failed to perform as advertised after Congress had allocated tens of million of dollars for the system.

The program is now being scaled back after an audit report by the Government Accountability Office determined that the Domestic Nuclear Detection Office (DNDO) "misled Congress about the testing, cost and effectiveness of the machines. Budget documents this year showed the cost to put the monitors at borders and ports would be far higher than the detection office originally estimated," according to the *Post*.

DNDO "is not sure" what methods it will deploy to screen "rail cars, *privately owned vehicles*, airport cargo and cargo at seaport terminals" in the near future, the report said. (emphasis added)

The lack of a reliable nuclear detection system will not deter NYPD officials however, who continue claiming Operation Sentinel is on a fast-track. But whether or not radiation monitors actually work, it now appears that the primary thrust of the project is to scrutinize all vehicles entering Manhattan. Information captured by the system will be stored in a huge database amenable to the usual data-mining techniques employed by the U.S. intelligence "community."

However, last Monday the New York Civil Liberties Union ([NYCLU](#)), filed a lawsuit in New York's State Supreme Court "challenging the NYPD's refusal to disclose information about its plan to create a massive surveillance network in downtown Manhattan." According to a [statement](#) by NYCLU executive director Donna Lieberman,

“The NYPD is planning blanket surveillance of millions of law-abiding New Yorkers, but it refuses to disclose even the simplest details of this costly proposal. A plan of this scope, expense and intrusiveness demands robust public debate and legislative oversight. The public has a right to this information.” (New York Civil Liberties Union, “NYCLU Sues NYPD for Information on Massive Surveillance Plan,” Press Release, September 8, 2008)

With initial estimates to complete the system in the range of \$100 million, massive cost overruns can be expected as high-tech security and other corporate grifters scramble to reap the benefits of federal, state and city largesse.

Among the many unanswered questions about the LMSI and Operation Sentinel, the NYCLU is seeking clarification on the scope of information gathered about citizens; how the cops intend to use the surveillance videos; with whom will police share captured video data; how long will such information be retained in its database; what privacy protections, if any, are built into the system; which private surveillance systems will be incorporated into LMSI; will assessments of London’s “Ring of Steel” be made prior to LMSI’s launch date; and finally, the extent of city funding.

Needless to say, the NYPD have been less than forthcoming. According to [The New York Times](#), the police all but accused the NYCLU of aiding and abetting “terrorism” for seeking information on their intrusive programs. The *Times* reported,

Paul J. Browne, the Police Department’s chief spokesman, said the department had already released as much information as it could without compromising its plans for an area of the city—and nation—that has repeatedly been a target of terrorists.

“We have already provided the N.Y.C.L.U. with information short of a road map for terrorists to use in another attack on the financial district,” Mr. Browne said. ( Al Baker, “Group Sues for Details on Security Downtown,” The New York Times, September 9, 2008)

With grants from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under the Urban Areas Security Initiative ([UASI](#)), New York City is listed as a “tier 1” city by DHS. Accordingly, the New York State Office of Homeland Security (NYOHS) has designated that the NYPD and the Port Authority Police Department will be able to disperse funds in order to implement the proposed LMSI for “full-time counterterrorism duties” including “intergovernmental assignments.”

And a NYOHS “Program Guidance” [document](#), states that “counterterrorism duties include such activities as intelligence gathering, information-sharing, and surveillance.”

Under the umbrella of the UASI, DHS is disbursing some \$781.6 million “to build capabilities in high-threat, high-density urban areas across the country. The seven highest risk urban areas will receive a combined total of \$429.9 million, and 53 high-risk urban areas will receive a total of \$351.7 million.” New York’s LMSI clearly fall within these federal guidelines and undoubtedly, the feds will have major input in decision making.

As with other federal homeland security programs, the lack of civilian oversight appear to be *de rigueur*. Indeed, the New York City Council first learned of these programs when they were reported in the media. One might also reasonably inquire: “intelligence gathering,

information-sharing, and surveillance” on whom and for what purpose?

If recent massive police preemptive actions in St. Paul during the run-up to the Republican National Convention are an indication of the direction “counterterrorist operations” are heading we can only surmise that the NYPD’s LMSI represent nothing less than a quantum leap towards the construction of a panoptic surveillance state.

Indeed, the *World Socialist Web Site* [reported](#) that eight members of the [RNC Welcoming Committee](#), an anarchist group that spearheaded protests in St. Paul have been charged with “terrorism.” The organizers have been brought up on conspiracy charges simply for attempting to organize marches and civil disobedience in Minnesota earlier this month during the coronation of right-wing presidential and vice presidential candidates John McCain and Sarah Palin, the darling of the theocratic Christian Right.

In what may be the first case of its kind, American citizens have been arrested and charged as terrorists for no other act than planning to protest and obstruct a political event. In this case the occasion was the nominating convention of a party chiefly responsible for policies detested by the majority of Americans, including the war in Iraq and the enrichment of a tiny layer of the enormously wealthy. (Tom Eley, “Political dissent as terrorism: ‘Minnesota Patriot Act’ charges filed against RNC Eight,” *World Socialist Web Site*, 11 September 2008)

As Eley points out, “more alarming than the case itself, however, is the fact that it has gone virtually unnoted by the national news media. This reporter could also find no mention of the case on the web sites of left-liberal publications such as the *Nation*, the *Progressive*, or *In These Times*.”

But as with all such repressive actions, the goal of “preemptive policing” and the mass surveillance that accompany the run-up to “cops-gone-wild” events like St. Paul, their purpose is to intimidate—and serve as a warning—to the population as a whole. In this respect, the Lower Manhattan Security Initiative like the NSA’s warrantless spying programs are clearly designed to insure a seamless transition from surveillance to wholesale repression.

### **Unleashing the FBI: the New COINTELPRO**

Meanwhile on the federal front, *The Washington Post* [reports](#) that “The Justice Department will unveil changes to FBI ground rules today that would put much more power into the hands of line agents pursuing leads on national security, foreign intelligence and even ordinary criminal cases.” Carrie Johnson writes,

The overhaul touches on several sensitive areas. It would allow, for example, agents to interview people in the United States about foreign intelligence cases without warrants or prior approval of their supervisors. It also would rewrite 1976 guidelines established after Nixon-era abuses that restrict the FBI’s authority to intervene in times of civil disorder and to infiltrate opposition groups. (“Rule Changes Would Give FBI Agents Extensive New Powers,” *The Washington Post*, September 12, 2008)

In other words, COINTELPRO-style infiltration and neutralization operations by federal

gangsters and their paid provocateurs will now be “normalized” under new Bushist rules. However, far from being a case of improving the efficacy of “information gathering” to “detect terrorist threats” as the *Post* claims, new federal guidelines will create a broad legal framework for the suppression of basic constitutional and democratic rights.

Indeed, under the new rules proposed by U.S. Attorney General Michael Mukasey, “threat assessments” based on one’s race, ethnicity or religion will become standard operating procedure as FBI agents and their informants target individuals, or left-wing political groups, solely on the basis of constitutionally-protected speech or religion.

Aping the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD, Nazi Security Service) approach to law enforcement, the Bush administration and their minions in the private security sector such as [InfraGard](#), seek to criminalize broad sections of the population who don’t fit a prescribed behavioral “norm.” Denouncing the proposals, the American Civil Liberties [wrote](#),

The rewritten guidelines have been drafted in a way to give the FBI the ability to begin surveillance without factual evidence, stating that a generalized “threat” is enough to use certain techniques. Also under the new guidelines, a person’s race or ethnic background could be used as a factor in opening an investigation, a move the ACLU believes will institute racial profiling as a matter of policy. The guidelines would also give the FBI the ability to use intrusive investigative techniques in advance of public demonstrations. These techniques would allow agents to conduct pre-textual (undercover) interviews, use informants and conduct physical surveillance in connection with First Amendment protected activities. (“New FBI Guidelines Open Door to Further Abuse,” American Civil Liberties Union, Press Release, September 12, 2008)

ACLU Executive Director Anthony D. Romero said,

“The new guidelines offer no specifics on how the FBI will ensure that race and religion are not used improperly as proxies for suspicion, nor do they sufficiently limit the extent to which government agents can infiltrate groups exercising their First Amendment rights. The Bush administration’s message once again is ‘trust us.’ After eight years of historic civil liberties abuses, the American people know better. From the U.S. attorney purges to the abuse of national security letters, the Department of Justice and the FBI have repeatedly shown that they are incapable of policing themselves.”

By tossing Nixon-era intelligence guidelines out the window, Mukasey and his masters in the Executive branch are granting line agents, “unparalleled leeway to investigate Americans without proper suspicion, and that will inevitably result in constitutional violations,” according to Caroline Fredrickson, Director of the ACLU Washington Legislative Office. “Our right to protest the government and its policies is not suspicious behavior; it is constitutionally protected speech.”

Unfortunately, in America’s post-constitutional “new normal,” characterized by an unprecedented looting of social wealth by crony capitalists, bloody wars of aggression, environmental plunder and the general putrefaction of culture under the flag of a “Christian Republic,” *protesting the government and its policies are indeed the quintessential hallmarks of suspicious behavior!*

Karl Marx perhaps said it best, prefiguring the high-tech barbarism of 21st century America:

“The past lies like a nightmare upon the present.”

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