

Creeping Fascism: History's Lessons

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“There are few things as odd as the calm, superior indifference with which I and those like me watched the beginnings of the Nazi revolution in Germany, as if from a box at the theater. ... Perhaps the only comparably odd thing is the way that now, years later....”

These are the words of Sebastian Haffner (pen name for Raimund Pretzel), who as a young lawyer in Berlin during the 1930s experienced the Nazi takeover and wrote a first-hand account. His children found the manuscript when he died in 1999 and published it the following year as “Geschichte eines Deutschen” (The Story of a German).

The book became an immediate bestseller and has been translated into 20 languages—in English as “Defying Hitler.”

I recently learned from his daughter Sarah, an artist in Berlin, that today is the 100th anniversary of Haffner’s birth. She had seen an earlier article in which I quoted her father and e-mailed to ask me to “write some more about the book and the comparison to Bush’s America. ... This is almost unbelievable.”

More about Haffner below. Let’s set the stage first by recapping some of what has been going on that may have resonance for readers familiar with the Nazi ascendancy, noting how “odd” it is that the frontal attack on our Constitutional rights is met with such “calm, superior indifference.”

Goebbels Would be Proud

It has been two years since top New York Times officials decided to let the rest of us in on the fact that the George W. Bush administration had been eavesdropping on American citizens without the court warrants required by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) of 1978.

The Times had learned of this well before the election in 2004 and acquiesced to White House entreaties to suppress the damaging information.

In late fall 2005 when Times correspondent James Risen’s book, “State of War: the Secret History of the CIA and the Bush Administration,” revealing the warrantless eavesdropping was being printed, Times publisher, Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., recognized that he could procrastinate no longer.

It would simply be too embarrassing to have Risen’s book on the street, with Sulzberger and his associates pretending that this explosive eavesdropping story did not fit Adolph Ochs’s

trademark criterion: All The News That's Fit To Print.

(The Times' own ombudsman, Public Editor Byron Calame, branded the newspaper's explanation for the long delay in publishing this story "woefully inadequate.")

When Sulzberger told his friends in the White House that he could no longer hold off on publishing in the newspaper, he was summoned to the Oval Office for a counseling session with the president on Dec. 5, 2005. Bush tried in vain to talk him out of putting the story in the Times.

The truth would out; part of it, at least.

Glitches

There were some embarrassing glitches. For example, unfortunately for National Security Agency Director Lt. Gen. Keith Alexander, the White House neglected to tell him that the cat would soon be out of the bag.

So on Dec. 6, Alexander spoke from the old talking points in assuring visiting House intelligence committee member Rush Holt, D-New Jersey, that the NSA did not eavesdrop on Americans without a court order.

Still possessed of the quaint notion that generals and other senior officials are not supposed to lie to congressional oversight committees, Holt wrote a blistering letter to Gen. Alexander after the Times, on Dec. 16, front-paged a feature by Risen and Eric Lichtblau, "Bush Lets U.S. Spy on Callers Without Courts."

But House Intelligence Committee chair Pete Hoekstra, R-Michigan, apparently found Holt's scruples benighted; Hoekstra did nothing to hold Alexander accountable for misleading Holt, his most experienced committee member, who had served as an intelligence analyst at the State Department.

What followed struck me as bizarre. The day after the Dec. 16 Times feature article, the president of the United States publicly admitted to a demonstrably impeachable offense.

Authorizing illegal electronic surveillance was a key provision of the second article of impeachment against President Richard Nixon. On July 27, 1974, this and two other articles of impeachment were approved by bipartisan votes in the House Judiciary Committee.

Bush Takes Frontal Approach

Far from expressing regret, the president bragged about having authorized the surveillance "more than 30 times since the September the 11th attacks," and said he would continue to do so. The president also said:

"Leaders in Congress have been briefed more than a dozen times on this authorization and the activities conducted under it."

On Dec. 19, 2005, then-Attorney General Alberto Gonzales and then-NSA Director Michael Hayden held a press conference to answer questions about the as yet unnamed surveillance program.

Gonzales was asked why the White House decided to flout FISA rather than attempt to amend it, choosing instead a “backdoor approach.” He answered:

“We have had discussions with Congress...as to whether or not FISA could be amended to allow us to adequately deal with this kind of threat, and we were advised that that would be difficult, if not impossible.”

Hmm. Impossible? It strains credulity that a program of the limited scope described would be unable to win ready approval from a Congress that had just passed the “Patriot Act” in record time.

James Risen has made the following quip about the prevailing mood: “In October 2001, you could have set up guillotines on the public streets of America.”

It was not difficult to infer that the surveillance program must have been of such scope and intrusiveness that, even amid highly stoked fear, it didn’t have a prayer for passage.

It turns out we didn’t know the half of it.

What To Call These Activities

“Illegal Surveillance Program” didn’t seem quite right for White House purposes, and the PR machine was unusually slow off the blocks.

It took six weeks to settle on “Terrorist Surveillance Program,” with FOX News leading the way followed by the president himself. This labeling would dovetail nicely with the president’s rhetoric on Dec. 17:

“In the weeks following the terrorist attacks on our nation, I authorized the National Security Agency, consistent with U.S. law and the Constitution, to intercept the international communications of people with known links to al-Qaeda and related terrorist organizations. ... The authorization I gave the National Security Agency after September 11 helped address that problem...”
[Emphasis added]

And Gen. Michael Hayden, who headed NSA from 1999 to 2005, was of course on the same page, dissembling as convincingly as the president. At his May 2006 confirmation hearings to become CIA director, he told of his soul-searching when, as director of NSA, he was asked to eavesdrop on Americans without a court warrant.

“I had to make this personal decision in early October 2001,” said Hayden. “It was a personal decision. ... I could not not do this.”

Like so much else, it was all because of 9/11. But we now know...

It Started Seven Months Before 9/11.

How many times have you heard it? The mantra “after 9/11 everything changed” has given absolution to all manner of sin.

We are understandably reluctant to believe the worst of our leaders, and this tends to make us negligent. After all, we learned from former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill that drastic changes were made in U.S. foreign policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian issue and toward Iraq at the first National Security Council meeting on Jan. 30, 2001.

Should we not have anticipated far-reaching changes at home as well?

Reporting by the Rocky Mountain News and court documents and testimony on a case involving Qwest strongly suggest that in February 2001 Hayden saluted smartly when the Bush administration instructed NSA to suborn AT&T, Verizon, and Qwest to spy illegally on you, me, and other Americans.

Bear in mind that this would have had nothing to do with terrorism, which did not really appear on the new administration's radar screen until a week before 9/11, despite the pleading of Clinton aides that the issue deserved extremely high priority.

So this until-recently-unknown pre-9/11 facet of the "Terrorist Surveillance Program" was not related to Osama bin Laden or to whomever he and his associates might be speaking. It had to do with us.

We know that the Democrats briefed on the "Terrorist Surveillance Program" include House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-California, (the one with the longest tenure on the House Intelligence Committee), Rep. Jane Harman, D-California, and former and current chairmen of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Bob Graham, D-Florida, and Jay Rockefeller, D-West Virginia, respectively.

May one interpret their lack of public comment on the news that the snooping began well before 9/11 as a sign they were co-opted and then sworn to secrecy?

It is an important question. Were the appropriate leaders in Congress informed that within days of George W. Bush's first inauguration the NSA electronic vacuum cleaner began to suck up information on you and me, despite the FISA law and the Fourth Amendment?

Are They All Complicit?

And are Democratic leaders about to cave in and grant retroactive immunity to those telecommunications corporations—AT&T and Verizon—which made millions by winking at the law and the Constitution?

(Qwest, to its credit, heeded the advice of its general counsel who said that what NSA wanted done was clearly illegal.)

What's going on here? Have congressional leaders no sense for what is at stake?

Lately the adjective "spineless" has come into vogue in describing congressional Democrats—no offense to invertebrates.

Nazis and Their Enablers

You don't have to be a Nazi. You can just be, well, a sheep.

In his journal, Sebastian Haffner decries what he calls the "sheepish submissiveness" with

which the German people reacted to a 9/11-like event, the burning of the German Parliament (Reichstag) on Feb. 27, 1933.

Haffner finds it quite telling that none of his acquaintances “saw anything out of the ordinary in the fact that, from then on, one’s telephone would be tapped, one’s letters opened, and one’s desk might be broken into.”

But it is for the cowardly politicians that Haffner reserves his most vehement condemnation. Do you see any contemporary parallels here?

In the elections of March 4, 1933, shortly after the Reichstag fire, the Nazi party garnered only 44 percent of the vote. Only the “cowardly treachery” of the Social Democrats and other parties to whom 56 percent of the German people had entrusted their votes made it possible for the Nazis to seize full power. Haffner adds:

“It is in the final analysis only that betrayal that explains the almost inexplicable fact that a great nation, which cannot have consisted entirely of cowards, fell into ignominy without a fight.”

The Social Democratic leaders betrayed their followers—“for the most part decent, unimportant individuals.” In May, the party leaders sang the Nazi anthem; in June the Social Democratic party was dissolved.

The middle-class Catholic party Zentrum folded in less than a month, and in the end supplied the votes necessary for the two-thirds majority that “legalized” Hitler’s dictatorship.

As for the right-wing conservatives and German nationalists: “Oh God,” writes Haffner, “what an infinitely dishonorable and cowardly spectacle their leaders made in 1933 and continued to make afterward. ... They went along with everything: the terror, the persecution of Jews. ... They were not even bothered when their own party was banned and their own members arrested.”

In sum: “There was not a single example of energetic defense, of courage or principle. There was only panic, flight, and desertion. In March 1933, millions were ready to fight the Nazis. Overnight they found themselves without leaders. ... At the moment of truth, when other nations rise spontaneously to the occasion, the Germans collectively and limply collapsed. They yielded and capitulated, and suffered a nervous breakdown. ... The result is today the nightmare of the rest of the world.”

This is what can happen when virtually all are intimidated.

Our Founding Fathers were not oblivious to this; thus, James Madison:

“I believe there are more instances of the abridgement of freedom of the people by gradual and silent encroachments by those in power than by violent and sudden usurpations. ... The means of defense against foreign danger historically have become the instruments of tyranny at home.”

We cannot say we weren’t warned.

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