

“Eavesdropping on America”: The NSA’s Orwellian Surveillance State

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As a matter of faith, some people believe that God can see and hear everything. But as a matter of fact, the U.S. government now has the kind of surveillance powers formerly attributed only to a supreme being.

Top “national security” officials in Washington now have the determination and tech prowess to keep tabs on billions of people. No one elected Uncle Sam to play God. But a dire shortage of democratic constraints has enabled the U.S. surveillance state to keep expanding with steely resolve.

By the time Edward Snowden used NSA documents to expose — beyond any doubt — a global surveillance dragnet, the situation had deteriorated so badly because the Bush and Obama administrations were able to dismiss earlier warnings to the public as little more than heresy.

Eight years ago, in the book *State of War*, *New York Times* reporter James Risen devoted a chapter to the huge expansion of surveillance. A secret decision by President George W. Bush “has opened up America’s domestic telecommunications network to the NSA in unprecedented and deeply troubling new ways, and represents a radical shift in the accepted policies and practices of the modern U.S. intelligence community,” Risen wrote.

Risen added: “The NSA is now tapping into the heart of the nation’s telephone network through direct access to key telecommunications switches that carry many of America’s daily phone calls and e-mail messages.”



Image: The logo for the Information Awareness Office, which oversaw the Total Information Awareness project.

More details on the surveillance state came in 2008 with James Bamford’s book *The Shadow Factory*, which illuminated the National Security Agency’s program for “eavesdropping on America.” And in August of 2012 — nearly 10 months before Snowden’s revelations began — filmmaker Laura Poitras released a [mini-documentary](#) on the *New York Times* website about the NSA’s mass surveillance program.

All three journalists relied on whistleblowers who balked at the NSA’s virtual mission to see and hear everything. Both books (especially *State of War*) depended on information from unnamed sources. The short documentary focused on a public whistleblower — former NSA executive William Binney, who continues to speak out.

Testifying to a committee of the German parliament in Berlin two weeks ago, Binney — whose 30 years at the NSA included work as a high-level intelligence official — [said](#) that the NSA has a “totalitarian mentality.”

Days later, speaking at a conference in London, Binney [explained](#):

“At least 80 percent of fiber-optic cables globally go via the U.S. This is no accident and allows the U.S. to view all communication coming in. At least 80 percent of all audio calls, not just metadata, are recorded and stored in the U.S. The NSA lies about what it stores.”

Since last summer, a backup source of strength for the voices of Binney, Thomas Drake, Kirk Wiebe and other NSA whistleblowers — the fact that Snowden has provided the public with NSA documents — is exactly what has enraged U.S. officials who want to maintain and escalate their surveillance power. Because of those unveiled documents, clarity about what the NSA is really doing has fueled opposition.

NSA surveillance proliferates in a context that goes well beyond spying. The same mentality that claims the right to cross all borders for surveillance — using the latest technologies to snoop on the most intimate communications and private actions of people across the globe — is also insisting on the prerogative to cross borders with the latest technologies to kill.

When a drone or cruise missile implements an assumed right to snuff out a life, without a semblance of due process, the presidential emulation of divine intervention is implicit.

But, in military terms, dominating the world is a prohibitively expensive goal. In the digital age, surveillance has emerged as a cost-effective way to extend the U.S. government’s global reach and put its intelligence capacities on steroids — while tens of billions of taxpayer dollars in annual revenues go to corporate contractors servicing the NSA, CIA and other agencies of the military-industrial-surveillance complex.

So the trend line continues to move in the wrong direction. Speaking last month at a [news conference](#) that launched [ExposeFacts.org](#) (part of the Institute for Public Accuracy, where I work), Binney said that in recent years the NSA’s surveillance activity has “only gotten worse.” He added: “I mean it’s almost in everything that you do. If you do anything electronically, they’re in it and they’re watching you.”

The information being collected is so vast that NSA operatives face a huge challenge of figuring out how to sift through it on such a large scale — “because they have to manually look at this data,” Binney said. “But the point is, they’re setting the stage for this to continue to the point where everybody could be monitored almost constantly throughout the day. That is an oppressive, suppressive state.”

Since last summer, revelations about NSA programs have been so profuse and complex that it’s difficult to gain an overview, to see the surveillance state’s toxic forest for the digital trees. But the macro picture has to do with a mind-blowing agenda for monitoring the people of the world.

“For me, the most significant revelation is the ambition of the United States government and its four English-speaking allies to literally eliminate privacy worldwide, which is not hyperbole,” journalist Glenn Greenwald said at a [news conference](#) three months ago. “The

goal of the United States government is to collect and store every single form of electronic communication that human beings have with one another and give themselves the capacity to monitor and analyze those communications.”

Such a goal, formerly reserved for the more fundamentalist versions of God, is now firmly entrenched at the top of the U.S. government — and at the top of corporate America. As Greenwald pointed out, “There almost is no division between the private sector and the NSA, or the private sector and the Pentagon, when it comes to the American ‘national security’ state. They really are essentially one.”

Now that’s the kind of monotheism the world can do without.

Norman Solomon is co-founder of RootsAction.org and executive director of the Institute for Public Accuracy, which recently launched ExposeFacts.org. His books include War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.

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