

It Can't Happen Here

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In 2002 I asked my House colleagues a rhetorical question with regard to the onslaught of government growth in the post-September 11th era: Is America becoming a police state?

The question is no longer rhetorical. We are not yet living in a total police state, but it is fast approaching. The seeds of future tyranny have been sown, and many of our basic protections against government have been undermined. The atmosphere since 2001 has permitted Congress to create whole new departments and agencies that purport to make us safer - always at the expense of our liberty. But security and liberty go hand-in-hand. Members of Congress, like too many Americans, don't understand that a society with no constraints on its government cannot be secure. History proves that societies crumble when their governments become more powerful than the people and private institutions.

Unfortunately, the new intelligence bill passed by Congress two weeks ago moves us closer to an encroaching police state by imposing the precursor to a full-fledged national ID card. Within two years, every American will need a "conforming" ID to deal with any federal agency - including TSA at the airport.

Undoubtedly many Americans and members of Congress don't believe America is becoming a police state, which is reasonable enough. They associate the phrase with highly visible symbols of authoritarianism like military patrols, martial law, and summary executions. But we ought to be concerned that we have laid the foundation for tyranny by making the public more docile, more accustomed to government bullying, and more accepting of arbitrary authority - all in the name of security. Our love for liberty above all has been so diminished that we tolerate intrusions into our privacy that would have been abhorred just a few years ago. We tolerate inconveniences and infringements upon our liberties in a manner that reflects poorly on our great national character of rugged individualism. American history, at least in part, is a history of people who don't like being told what to do. Yet we are increasingly empowering the federal government and its agents to run our lives.

Terror, fear, and crises like 9-11 are used to achieve complacency and obedience, especially when citizens are deluded into believing they are still a free people. The loss of liberty, we are assured, will be minimal, short-lived, and necessary. Many citizens believe that once the war on terror is over, restrictions on their liberties will be reversed. But this war is undeclared and open-ended, with no precise enemy and no expressly stated final goal. Terrorism will never be eradicated completely; does this mean future presidents will assert extraordinary war powers indefinitely?

Washington DC provides a vivid illustration of what our future might look like. Visitors to

Capitol Hill encounter police barricades, metal detectors, paramilitary officers carrying fully automatic rifles, police dogs, ID checks, and vehicle stops. The people are totally disarmed; only the police and criminals have guns. Surveillance cameras are everywhere, monitoring street activity, subway travel, parks, and federal buildings. There's not much evidence of an open society in Washington, DC, yet most folks do not complain - anything goes if it's for government-provided safety and security.

After all, proponents argue, the government is doing all this to catch the bad guys. If you don't have anything to hide, they ask, what are you so afraid of? The answer is that I'm afraid of losing the last vestiges of privacy that a free society should hold dear. I'm afraid of creating a society where the burden is on citizens to prove their innocence, rather than on government to prove wrongdoing. Most of all, I'm afraid of living in a society where a subservient populace surrenders its liberties to an all-powerful government.

It may be true that average Americans do not feel intimidated by the encroachment of the police state. Americans remain tolerant of what they see as mere nuisances because they have been deluded into believing total government supervision is necessary and helpful, and because they still enjoy a high level of material comfort. That tolerance may wane, however, as our standard of living falls due to spiraling debt, endless deficit spending at home and abroad, a declining fiat dollar, inflation, higher interest rates, and failing entitlement programs. At that point attitudes toward omnipotent government may change, but the trend toward authoritarianism will be difficult to reverse.

Those who believe a police state can't happen here are poor students of history. Every government, democratic or not, is capable of tyranny. We must understand this if we hope to remain a free people.

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