

# Uncle Sam and Corporate Tech: Domestic Partners Raising “Digital Big Brother”

By [Norman Solomon](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Global Research, June 20, 2013

A terrible formula has taken hold: warfare state + corporate digital power = surveillance state.

“National security” agencies and major tech sectors have teamed up to make Big Brother a reality. “Of the estimated \$80 billion the government will spend on intelligence this year, most is spent on private contractors,” the New York Times [noted](#). The synergy is great for war-crazed snoops in Washington and profit-crazed moguls in Silicon Valley, but poisonous for civil liberties and democracy.

“Much of the coverage of the NSA spying scandal has underplayed crucial context: The capacity of the government to engage in constant surreptitious monitoring of all civilians has been greatly enhanced by the commercialization of the Internet,” media analyst Robert McChesney [pointed out](#) this week.

Overall, he said, “the commercialized Internet, far from producing competition, has generated the greatest wave of monopoly in the history of capitalism.” And the concentration of online digital power is, to put it mildly, user-friendly for the surveillance state.

It’s a truly odious and destructive mix — a government bent on perpetual war and a digital tech industry dominated by a few huge firms with an insatiable drive to maximize profits. Those companies have a lot to offer the government, and vice versa.

“The giant monopolistic firms that rule the Internet — Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Verizon, AT&T, Comcast, Microsoft — all have tremendous incentive to collect information on people,” McChesney said. “There is a great deal of profit for these firms and others to work closely with the national security apparatus, and almost no incentive to refuse to participate. In short, there is a military-digital complex deeply embedded into the political economy and outside any credible review process by elected representatives, not to mention the public.”

Central pieces of the puzzle — routinely left out of mainline media coverage — have to do with key forces at work. Why such resolve in Washington’s highest places for the vast surveillance that’s integral to the warfare state?

What has not changed is the profusion of corporations making a killing from the warfare state in tandem with Washington’s quest for geopolitical positioning, access to fossil fuels and other raw materials — and access to markets for U.S.-based industries ranging from financial services to fast food.

Let's give credit to New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman for candor as he wrote approvingly in his book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*: "The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist. McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas, the designer of the U.S. Air Force F-15. And the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technologies to flourish is called the U.S. Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps."

On Wednesday, I had a brief [on-air exchange](#) with Friedman, live on KQED Radio in San Francisco.

Solomon: "I think it's unfortunate the sensibility that Thomas Friedman, who's a very smart guy, has brought to bear in so many realms. For instance, we heard a few minutes ago, asked about Iraq and the lessons to be drawn — quote, 'We overpaid for it.' 'We overpaid for it.' Which is sort of what you might call jingo-narcissism, to coin a term. Just the dire shortage of remorse, particularly given Thomas Friedman's very large role in cheering on, with his usual caveats, but cheering on the invasion of Iraq before it took place. Full disclosure, this is Norman Solomon, I chronicled his critique in my book *War Made Easy*, his critique of foreign policy, and he did cheerlead — in his sort of kind of erudite glib way, he did cheerlead the invasion of Iraq before it took place. Just as, as I chronicle in the book, he was gleeful in his columns about the bombing of Serbia, including Belgrade, civilian areas, just chortled and very very gleeful about that bombing. One other point I'd like to make. His recent column about NSA surveillance is absolutely a formula for throwing away the First Amendment gradually in stages. The idea that somehow we should relinquish the sacred Fourth Amendment, a little bit at a time, maybe not a little bit at a time, because if there's terrorism that takes places in a big way again in this country then hold onto your hats — I mean, that is formulaic as an excuse, may I say a bit of a craven way, to accept this attack on our civil liberties."

Host: "Norman, let me thank you for the call and get a response from Tom Friedman."

Friedman: "Well first of all, I would invite, I wrote a book called *Longitudes and Attitudes* that has all my columns leading up to the Iraq War. And what you'll find if you read those columns is someone agonizing over a very very difficult decision. To call it cheerleading is just stupid and obnoxious. Okay. Number one. And on the question of the Fourth Amendment, as has been pointed out, there actually has been no case of abuse that has been reported so far with this program. Believe me, if there were one, two, ten or twenty, then I think we'd be having a very different debate. And so to simply — he says I'm dismissing the Fourth Amendment, which is ludicrous, I'm terribly agonized over this whole business — but to simply blithely say, 'Oh, you're just trying to use the threat of another terrorist attack,' as if that isn't a live possibility, as if we haven't had three or four real examples of people trying to do things that had they gotten through I think would have led to even worse restrictions on privacy and civil liberties."

Well, that's Thomas Friedman, in sync with the downward spiral of fear, threats, militarism and corporate consolidation. What a contrast with the clarity from Robert McChesney.

A week before the Guardian began breaking stories about NSA surveillance, McChesney [appeared](#) on FAIR's "CounterSpin" radio program to talk about the findings in his new book *Digital Disconnect*. He warned that we "have an economy dominated by a handful of monopolistic giants working hand in hand with a national security state that's completely off-limits to public review, to monitor the population." And he said: "It's not a

tenable situation for a free society.”

**Norman Solomon** is co-founder of [RootsAction.org](http://RootsAction.org) and founding director of the Institute for Public Accuracy. His books include “War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.”

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