



Written by [James Heiser](#) on November 14, 2009

Obama Continues Bush-era Surveillance

When he was running for President, Barack Hussein Obama claimed that a decision to elect his opponent would mean, in essence, a “third term” for George Bush. The purported purpose for voting for the candidate of “Hope and Change” was to mark a break with the past eight years, right?

But, as some on the extreme Left were noting only days after the election: “[Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.](#)” For all of the differences over secondary policy issues such as whether or not to increase the number of troops in Afghanistan, or whether or not to place Guantanamo detainees on trial, the march toward a permanent ‘state of emergency continues, as does emphasis on security over liberty.



Speaking before the [Council on Foreign Relations](#) on July 29, 2009, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano [stated](#):

Now DHS monitors and shares information about potential homegrown threats as well. These can be individuals, radicals — radicalized by events abroad, or lone-wolf attacks.

In the wake of the infamous Homeland Security document released in April that warned of the threat of “rightwing extremism,” Napolitano’s remarks take on a particularly alarming character. The national security apparatus that was put in place after September 11 has troubled civil libertarians from the onset — what needs to be understood is that a change of political parties has neither dismantled that apparatus, nor reined in its most troubling aspects.

Some of the implications of this on-going trend are highlighted in an article at CBSNews.com (“[Surveillance State, U.S.A.](#)”) by Alfred W McCoy. McCoy, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, places the events of the Bush and Obama administrations into a much longer perspective:

In his approach to National Security Agency surveillance, as well as CIA renditions, drone assassinations, and military detention, President Obama has to a surprising extent embraced the expanded executive powers championed by his conservative predecessor, George W. Bush. This bipartisan affirmation of the imperial executive could “reverberate for generations,” warns Jack Balkin, a specialist on First Amendment freedoms at Yale Law School. And consider these but some of the early fruits from the hybrid seeds that the Global War on Terror has planted on American soil. Yet surprisingly few Americans seem aware of the toll that this already endless war has taken on our civil liberties.

Don’t be too surprised, then, when, in the midst of some future crisis, advanced surveillance methods and other techniques developed in our recent counterinsurgency wars migrate from



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Baghdad, Falluja, and Kandahar to your hometown or urban neighborhood....

Think of our counterinsurgency wars abroad as so many living laboratories for the undermining of a democratic society at home, a process historians of such American wars can tell you has been going on for a long, long time. Counterintelligence innovations like centralized data, covert penetration, and disinformation developed during the Army's first protracted pacification campaign in a foreign land — the Philippines from 1898 to 1913 — were repatriated to the United States during World War I, becoming the blueprint for an invasive internal security apparatus that persisted for the next half century.

Almost 90 years later, George W. Bush's Global War on Terror plunged the U.S. military into four simultaneous counterinsurgency campaigns, large and small — in Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and (once again) the Philippines — transforming a vast swath of the planet into an ad hoc "counterterrorism" laboratory. The result? Cutting-edge high-tech security and counterterror techniques that are now slowly migrating homeward.

And McCoy provides the following example of what experiments in such a "laboratory" have led to:

The first hint that biometrics were helping to pacify Baghdad's far larger population of seven million came in April 2007 when the *New York Times* published an eerie image of American soldiers studiously photographing an Iraqi's eyeball. With only a terse caption to go by, we can still infer the technology behind this single record of a retinal scan in Baghdad: digital cameras for U.S. patrols, wireless data transfer to a mainframe computer, and a database to record as many adult Iraqi eyes as could be gathered. Indeed, eight months later, the Washington Post reported that the Pentagon had collected over a million Iraqi fingerprints and iris scans. By mid-2008, the U.S. Army had also confined Baghdad's population behind blast-wall cordons and was checking Iraqi identities by satellite link to a biometric database.

Pushing ever closer to the boundaries of what present-day technology can do, by early 2008, U.S. forces were also collecting facial images accessible by portable data labs called Joint Expeditionary Forensic Facilities, linked by satellite to a biometric database in West Virginia. "A war fighter needs to know one of three things," explained the inventor of this lab-in-a-box. "Do I let him go? Keep him? Or shoot him on the spot?"

A future is already imaginable in which a U.S. sniper could take a bead on the eyeball of a suspected terrorist, pause for a nanosecond to transmit the target's iris or retinal data via backpack-sized laboratory to a computer in West Virginia, and then, after instantaneous feedback, pull the trigger.

Such technologies also have virtually endless applications for the security-obsessed at home, too. There is already a nervous regime that places entire television networks on its "enemies list" and a Department of Homeland Security that classifies veterans and concerned Americans as potential terrorists. How long will it be before we are told that mandatory iris scans at airports, train stations, federal buildings, etc., are the next "breakthrough" which will keep us all safe?

Of course, many of those who maintain today that "It can never happen here!," will, on that day, be saying, "We've *always* done it this way."

The solution to much of the problem of terrorism is to be found in common sense and constitutional methods of police investigation, not in depriving the entire populace of even more of their civil liberties. The attacks on New York in 2001 and Ft. Hood in 2009 took place because information that the



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government already possessed was not acted upon. It is debatable whether we are safer now than we were before September 11; what is beyond debate is that we are certainly less free. And in this, for all the crowing about "Hope and Change," the words of Pogo come to mind: "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

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