



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on July 3, 2013

The U.S. Postal Service Is Monitoring Your Snail Mail

The U.S. government is not content to monitor your phone calls and your Internet activity; it's now reading your snail mail, too.

[A story in the New York Times](#) published Wednesday, July 3, tells the story of Buffalo, New York resident, Leslie James Pickering. Pickering reports that last September he noticed "something odd in his mail:" a "handwritten card, apparently delivered by mistake, with instructions for postal workers to pay special attention to the letters and packages sent to his home," the *Times* story claims.



The card — a picture of which appears in the *Times* story — appears to read: "Show all mail to supv" — supervisor — "for copying prior to going out on the street." Pickering's name was written on the card, as well as the word "Confidential," written in green ink. Apparently, Pickering was the unwitting target of a "longtime surveillance system" the *Times* calls "mail covers."

It doesn't stop there, however. While snail mail surveillance has been a tool of law enforcement for over a century, the program that targeted Pickering is called Mail Isolation Control and Tracking. As part of this surveillance tactic, the "Postal Service computers photograph the exterior of every piece of paper mail that is processed in the United States — about 160 billion pieces last year. It is not known how long the government saves the images."

When combined, the NSA and the U.S. Postal Service can keep every form of communication — electronic and conventional — under constant surveillance, without probable cause. This last fact is a direct violation of the Fourth Amendment. [The Fourth Amendment mandates:](#)

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

The *New York Times* describes how the mail monitoring program works:

At the request of law enforcement officials, postal workers record information from the outside of letters and parcels before they are delivered. (Actually opening the mail requires a warrant.) The information is sent to whatever law enforcement agency asked for it. Tens of thousands of pieces of mail each year undergo this scrutiny.

The Mail Isolation Control and Tracking program was created after the anthrax attacks in late 2001 that killed five people, including two postal workers. Highly secret, it seeped into public view last month when the F.B.I. cited it in its investigation of [ricin](#)-laced letters sent to President Obama and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. It enables the Postal Service to retroactively track mail correspondence at the request of law enforcement. No one disputes that it is sweeping.

Mark D. Rasch, a former director of the Department of Justice's computer crime unit is quoted in the



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Times story exposing the extent of the snooping. "In the past, mail covers were used when you had a reason to suspect someone of a crime," Rasch said, in the *Times* piece. "Now it seems to be 'Let's record everyone's mail so in the future we might go back and see who you were communicating with.' Essentially you've added mail covers on millions of Americans."

The newspaper also quotes Bruce Schneier, a computer security expert and an author, who criticizes the program as "an invasion of privacy" regardless of the particular methods employed to record the mail. "Basically they are doing the same thing as the other programs, collecting the information on the outside of your mail, the metadata, if you will, of names, addresses, return addresses and postmark locations, which gives the government a pretty good map of your contacts, even if they aren't reading the contents," he said in the *Times* article.

It's not just the FBI that's rifling through your mail and copying the information. According to the story, the IRS, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) have also taken advantage of the program's power to pry.

Again, the *Times* provides a few details on how mail surveillance requests are processed:

For mail cover requests, law enforcement agencies simply submit a letter to the Postal Service, which can grant or deny a request without judicial review. Law enforcement officials say the Postal Service rarely denies a request. In other government surveillance program, such as wiretaps, a federal judge must sign off on the requests.

The mail cover surveillance requests are granted for about 30 days, and can be extended for up to 120 days. There are two kinds of mail covers: those related to criminal activity and those requested to protect national security. The criminal activity requests average 15,000 to 20,000 per year, said law enforcement officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they are prohibited by law from discussing the requests. The number of requests for antiterrorism mail covers has not been made public.

That's sounds similar to the level of oversight exercised by the FISA court over electronic surveillance petitions submitted by the NSA. [The New American reported in May](#) that, as required by provisions of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act Amendments of 2008 (FISA) and the Patriot Act (as amended in 2005), the Department of Justice revealed to Congress the number of applications for eavesdropping received and rejected by the FISA court.

The letter addressed to Senator Harry Reid (D-Nev.) reports that in 2012, of the 1,789 requests made by the government to monitor the electronic communications of citizens, not a single one was rejected. That's right. The court, established specifically to judge the merits of applications by the government to spy on citizens, gave a green light to every government request for surveillance.

Not content to be a mere formality for electronic surveillance, the FISA court also held the coats of the FBI while that agency carried out the constitutionally suspect searches and seizures set out in 212 applications.

When contacted by *The New American* for comment, the U.S. Postal Service refused to comment on the Mail Isolation Control and Tracking program.

Taken together, the roster of snooping programs in use by the federal government places every American under the threat of constant surveillance. Every citizen is now a suspect. The government, it seems, will continue construction of the Panopticon until the entire country is being watched around



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the clock and every monitored activity is recorded and made retrievable by agents that will have a dossier on every American.

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