



Written by [Beverly K. Eakman](#) on February 7, 2011

Normalizing the Surveillance Society

Washington Times [reported](#) last week: "The District's top security chiefs are planning to expand their use of electronic surveillance by issuing tickets for more traffic offenses, integrating thousands of private and public cameras into a single feed and adding portable cameras that can be positioned to peek into any neighborhood." High-tech cameras will now be peering into neighborhoods, pinpointing both incidences of a petty nature (public urination, graffiti, and jaywalking) as well as larger offenses (purse snatching, burglary, murder and kidnapping). All in the name of safety, of course.



When "traffic" cameras were initially installed at busy intersections, they were supposed to be used to catch motorists endangering our safety. Now surveillance cameras are used for much more than that. But should we really be surprised by this trend? As late-night comedian Jay Leno would no doubt quip, using his favorite line: "Well, who could have seen *that* coming!"

Of course, the growth of the surveillance state is not limited to cameras. And when you consider the vastness of technological developments that can be deployed by a growing surveillance state, which this author has repeatedly warned against over the years, the picture for America's future is not warm and fuzzy. Consider the Orwellian possibilities: Specialized, implanted identification chips in humans (including newborns and the elderly); universal mental "health" screening; routine bag and purse checks in buildings; Transportation Security Administration (TSA) expansions into all subways, trains, etc.; backpack checks and metal detectors in every school (including random student strip searches); and surreptitious, snoop questionnaires disseminated in classrooms in an attempt to identify "politically unreliable" opinions.

Fantastic? Not when you look at current trends and project the lines. Many Americans have already accepted the notion that their right to privacy must be violated at airports for their own good. But what is the difference, in principle, between the searches the government is routinely conducting at airports — in violation of our Fourth Amendment guarantee against unreasonable searches and seizures — and similar searches carried out in other venues? Moreover, if government officials can gawk at our nude photos and grope us for the stated purpose of keeping us safe, then, we should ask, what other measures might these guardians of public safety someday impose — ostensibly for our own good or the good of society as a whole? How might developing technology be deployed to make the emerging surveillance state even more pervasive?

Of course, technology can be used for good purposes as well as bad. "EZ Passes" at toll roads, for example, are obviously considered a benefit by those who use them. But this same technology can also be used to monitor individuals' travel. And that thread of information can be interwoven with myriad other threads, both public and private, to create a detailed profile of an individual in a government



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database.

Should medical records, credit-card purchases, phone numbers dialed and received, magazine subscriptions (both print and online), religious preference, opinions of students and parents (which children freely divulge), and other information about yourself be compiled and cross-referenced by the government in a huge database, it is easy to imagine how that information could be "interpreted" by government and abused. Regardless of what the data collection is called — "Total Information Awareness," "Data-mining," "Super-Snoops," etc. — it does not present a happy picture.

The statistical model created from this computerized information could be used to predict, sometimes with stunning accuracy (or worse, deliberate *inaccuracy*) future behavior. This is called "predictive computer technology," and the model can be used by experts to assign a "level of danger" to specific individuals. We've all heard of the "no fly" list, which bulges with the names of many ordinary, law-abiding citizens. That list is just the tip of the iceberg of how ordinary citizens could be viewed as potential criminals by their government as the surveillance states grows.

Especially troubling is that many of the nation's conservative columnists are buying in to these technologies as increasing instances of mass shootings by radicalized foreign entities, as well as demented individuals commit mass attacks on Americans. What these columnists do not presently recognize is that this sort of thing can be used against even columnists themselves somewhere down the road, should they offend the Powers That Be, or even irritate their employers. Our nation's leaders, heads of agencies, and the major media are becoming more elitist by the day, and perceived opinions, after all, will become increasingly important to them.

The main impetus behind the emerging surveillance state may be the threat of terrorism, both real and perceived, but it is not limited to that. Even parents are buying into tracking technology for their children. As far back as the year 2002, implants were already selling for big bucks under names like "the Babysitter," "the Constant Companion," "the Invisible Bodyguard," and "the Micro-Manager" — and the public was buying them because of the hype over babies being abducted from hospitals, CEOs and executives being kidnapped, and family members with Alzheimer's getting lost. But if the technology can be used for these purposes, then why not use the same technology to monitor those who are likely to commit crimes based on the government's statistical model?

The bottom line is that many Americans are being unwittingly "conditioned" to accept more monitoring and surveillance in various aspects of their lives. For example, the latest crop of high-tech crime-stopper TV dramas routinely show the "good guys," the ones with the highest government clearances, using large, mounted touch-screens to isolate, enlarge, and super-impose with their fingers footage taken from video-cameras on freeways, in stores, and at major intersections to "catch" criminals or zoom in on something as small as a license plate. Such capabilities are no longer science-fiction, yet remain novel enough to capture the imagination of viewers. But by their very repetition, such scenes also "acclimate," or "condition" Americans to accept being constantly watched.

Beverly K. Eakman began her career as a teacher in 1968. She left to become a technical writer for a NASA contractor. She was a former speechwriter for director of the Voice of America and for the late Chief Justice Warren E. Burger when he chaired the Commission on the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution. She served as a writer for the U.S. Dept. of Justice before retiring from the federal government. She is the author of six books on education policy, mental-health issues, data-trafficking,



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