

Voice of the Left

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Big Brother Is Watching

"They, that would give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty or safety." Benjamin Franklin

Boy Caesar stood before the multitude in all his glory, boldly proclaiming yet another of his messianic denunciations of evil... But sooner or later he was going to have to talk about *it*.

The New York Times had just broken the story that the National Security Agency (NSA) was spying on Americans citizens... without search warrants.

Here's what the Fearless One had to say as he addressed an audience at the Brooke Army Medical Center shortly after the story broke.

"I can say that if somebody from al-Qaeda's calling you, we'd like to know why. In the meantime, this program is conscious of people's civil liberties, as I am. This is a limited program... I repeat, limited. And it's limited to calls from outside the United States, to calls within the United States."

Like so many of his assurances, they were hollow.

The very next day the White House had to go back and explain that, well, no, the National Security Agency's domestic spying program is not limited to calls from outside the United States, or to calls from people known or even suspected of being with al-Qaeda. Turns out, thousands of Americans and resident foreigners have been, or are being, monitored and recorded by the NSA. It's more like information-mining, which is what, you may recall, the administration said it would NOT do.

Apparently, not everyone in the Justice Department thought this was kosher. In fact, U.S. District Judge James Robertson, one of eleven members of the secret Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, sent a letter of resignation to Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. after hearing of the secret program. Roberts was convinced that the program was illegal, a clear breach of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. And how did our President react to this move by such a powerful and influential judge? By announcing that the FBI was going to investigate The New York Times.

The ancient Greeks had a name for this – shoot the messenger.

So what is the National Security Agency? Established in 1952 by President Truman, the NSA is the largest and most secret of U.S. intelligence agencies. Headquartered between

Baltimore and Washington, DC, the agency has two principal functions: to protect U.S. government communications and intercept foreign transmissions. Now it's been given a third.

Don't forget, we've already got that little thing called the Patriot Act. Despite the government's inability to prove that this heinous breach of our Constitution has helped us to arrest even a single terrorist, the Act was renewed for another six months. But it wasn't enough. Not for Bush.

The White House tells us that the president has "special powers" granted to him as Commander in Chief that makes all this spying stuff perfectly legal. (Seems to me that a president with the initials R.N. had a similar idea. How did his administration end again?) As for the special powers, there must be a secret clause to our constitution of which I must confess that I am totally unaware. Judge Robertson seems to be in the dark too.

Bottom line is this. Bush breaks a law that he didn't remotely need to, then denounces anyone who discusses the matter as helping the enemy. (We've heard this before.) Wake up America! The choice is not between a police state and another al-Qaeda attack. A better way to make our country safer might be to find out who's crossing the border. Perhaps the budget for the NSA spy program could be spent on taking some sensible precautions at protecting our nuclear power and chemical plants, or securing our harbors. Better yet, do something to make the Department of Homeland Security into something resembling an effective agency. Remember Katrina?

For a child who grew up in the 60's, this is déjà vu. Our government begins a secret spy program (like R.N. did to spy on "threats" like John Lennon) and then vows the information will be guarded and the innocent protected. Unfortunately, governments (all of them) have a track record of abusing power when the necessary checks and balances are removed.

Case in point. One of the first to make use of the NSA program for his own purposes was that gentle soul of discretion, John Bolton, the Godzilla diplomat. (In case you don't know, he's the chap who doesn't believe in the UN and... thanks to Bush... is now our UN Ambassador.) During his confirmation hearings, comrade Bolton called on the NSA TEN times to identify sources he wanted the names of. Presumably, this was in connection with the government's undercover spy program on the United Nations shortly before the Iraq War began. I wonder now.

Let me get this straight. We're supposed to trust implicitly a regime that was wrong about weapons of mass destruction; Saddam's ties to al-Qaeda (the 911 commission said there was no "cohesive operational relationship"); how much the war in Iraq would cost ("Iraq's oil revenues would pay for the war" Rummy said); the body armor issue (Rummy stated the "rumor" was "unequivocally false"); which swore the CIA was not kidnapping people (they were); and actually fought against a ban on torture. Ironically, Bush practically had to be "tortured" into signing the recent ban! Of course, he has told us since that he can "suspend this ban wherever necessary for national security."

Getting the message?

We have a government who has fought for the right to swoop down in the middle of the night, secretly detain us, throw us in a dungeon in Guantanamo (indefinitely), and even execute us after a good ole' fashioned military tribunal... IN SECRET ... and we're supposed to trust them.

There's another reason I'm not so anxious to support a Bush-sponsored domestic spying operation. Inevitably, the program will be manned by incompetent political hacks. Look no further than to whom Bush entrusted FEMA.

Let us not forget what our country represents. We are a nation of laws -- the torch bearer of a revolutionary struggle that began 800 years ago at Runnymede. We exist because the Constitution exists... and for no other reason.

History teaches us that we must remain vigilant. We can ill afford to fail to understand that the battles fought at Little Rock, Selma and Montgomery were just as great as those at Lexington and Concord.

Our revolution is ongoing and the enemy is often ourselves.