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Operation Sentinel: The High-Tech Police State Takes Shape

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Operation Sentinel, a new program unveiled by the New York City Police Department (NYPD) and U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), would encircle Manhattan with thousands of surveillance cameras that photograph every car or truck entering and exiting the city across its network of bridges and tunnels.

Information captured by this intrusive project would be stored in a huge database for an undisclosed period of time. Additionally, a network of sensors installed at toll plazas would allegedly be able to capable detect radiological materials that could be used in potential terror plots, the ***New York Times*** reports.

However, the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) has **denounced** the proposal as "an attack on New Yorkers' right to privacy." NYCLU Executive Director Donna Lieberman lambasted this outrageous proposal saying,

> "The NYPD's latest plan to track and monitor the movements of millions of law-abiding people is an assault on this country's historical respect for the right to privacy and the freedom to be left alone. That this is happening without public debate, and that elected officials have had no opportunity to study this program is even more alarming." ("NYCLU: NYPD Plan to Track Millions of Law-Abiding People is an Assault on Privacy Rights," New York Civil Liberties Union, August 12, 2008)

Last month I **reported** on a high-tech surveillance system under development by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (**DARPA**) called "Combat Zones That See" (CTS).

The 2003 program was predicated on the notion that once thousands of digital CCTV networks were installed across occupied or "homeland" cities, CTS would provide occupying troops–or police–with "motion-pattern analysis across whole city scales." Based on complex algorithms linked to the numeric recognition of license plate numbers and scanned-in human profiles, CTS would furnish troops–or cops–real-time, "situational awareness" of the "battlespace."

Despite repeated attempts by NYCLU to obtain information on Operation Sentinel, NYPD and DHS have refused to provide any information about their mega-surveillance system. While all traces of CTS disappeared from DARPA's website, portions of the program have resurfaced with a vengeance, courtesy of the NYPD and DHS.

According to *New York Times* reporter Al Baker,

> Data on each vehicle–its time-stamped image, license plate imprint and radiological signature–would be sent to a command center in Lower Manhattan, where it would be indexed and stored for at least a month as part of a broad security plan that emphasizes protecting the city's financial district, the spokesman, Paul J. Browne, said. If it were not linked to a suspicious vehicle or a law enforcement investigation, it would be eliminated, he said. ("City Would Photograph Every Vehicle Entering Manhattan and Sniff Out Radiation," The New York Times, August 12, 2008)

While preventing terrorists from detonating a radiological dirty bomb or a nuclear device in Manhattan–or anywhere else for that matter–is certainly a salutary government function, the misuse of such a system for illegal surveillance of the citizenry cannot be ruled out in advance nor dismissed out of hand as mere paranoia.

In addition to civil liberties concerns–no small matter after all, given the repressive nature of NYPD and DHS–Operation Sentinel's grandiose scheme bank on technological systems which *do not exist*.

The *Times* dryly notes, the proposed plan "relies on integrating layers of technologies, some that are still being perfected." In other words, the program is rife with potential abuse by enterprising security contractors, many with documented histories of promising much, delivering little and with substantial cost overruns borne by the public.

The department currently deploys portable radiation vehicles known as TRACS, or Tactical Radiation Acquisition and Characterization System, which the *Times* claims can detect radiological agents such as cesium and cobalt, and differentiate "between dangerous ones and ones used in products like smoke detectors or medical devices."

However, as I **reported** in June, another system under development, the "Advanced Spectroscopic Portal" or ASP, allegedly a more "advanced" system than those currently used, failed, as do today's systems, to differentiate between the components of a radiological dirty bomb and natural radiation emitters such as *kitty litter, ceramics and bananas!*

As I noted, the ASP program is already tens of millions of dollars above the original estimate provided by Raytheon, other contractors and DHS. Why therefore, would any sane person believe that the system currently under consideration would be anymore functional or cost effective? Unless that is, Operation Sentinel's real purpose is to enhance an already-formidable surveillance state.

NYPD Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly and his staff have been "urging the creation of a London-style surveillance system for the financial district that relies on license plate readers, movable roadblocks and 3,000 public and private security cameras below Canal Street, all linked to a coordination center at 55 Broadway. Known as the Lower Manhattan Security Initiative, the center is to open in September," according to the *Times*.

NYPD spokesperson Paul J. Browne "could not say, when the program [Operation Sentinel] would be completed," though "the Lower Manhattan Initiative is expected to be in place by 2010." Since 2007, NYPD have been using CTS-type CCTV systems to read license plates linked to databases for (unspecified) "intelligence purposes."

And if the illegal handling of the 2004 Republican National Convention protests are an

indication of Operation Sentinel's intended purpose, New York City residents' outrage with the proposal are fully justified.

The *Times* revealed their own proclivities on this score when they prominently featured the "analysis" of so-called "terrorism expert," Steven Emerson, the executive director of the Washington-D.C.-based **Investigative Project on Terrorism**, a right-wing think-tank with close ties to the Bush administration and former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani.

When civil libertarians (unnamed by the "newspaper of record") voiced concerns over the intrusive nature of Operation Sentinel and the Lower Manhattan Security Initiative, Emerson dismissed their apprehensions out of hand,

> "It is one tool of ensuring that if there is somebody on a terrorist watch list or someone driving erratically, or if a pattern develops that raises suspicions, it gives them an opportunity to investigate further and–if need be–track down the drivers or the passengers," he said. "The bottom line is they can't frisk everybody coming into Manhattan; they cannot wand everyone, as they do at airports. This is a passive collection of data that is not as personally invasive as what they do at airports."

An Islamophobe with a long record of blaming Muslims and the left for every act of terrorism under the sun, Emerson demonstrated his bona fides in 1995 when he claimed that "Arab terrorists" were responsible for the horrific bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City.

The blast claimed 168 lives, including 19 children in a daycare center while wounding hundreds of others. Attentive readers may recall that the Murrah building bombing was in fact, carried out by a neo-Nazi gang linked to Timothy McVeigh and the Aryan Republican Army.

While Emerson claims Operation Sentinel is "a passive collection of data," as the American Civil Liberties Union **reports**, there are currently more than *one million* names in an FBI-administered database known as the Terrorist Screening Center. Such an unwieldy monstrosity is hardly a tightly-focused list of potential "threats"!

But let's be clear: Operation Sentinel, and a host of other programs cooked-up by Bush regime war criminals and their corporatist allies is another sordid scheme to keep Americans terrorized, while destroying our civil liberties under cover of "homeland security."

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