

Spying is Meant to Crush Citizens' Dissent, not Catch Terrorists

The Big Secret Behind the Spying Program

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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While many Americans understand why the NSA is conducting mass surveillance of U.S. citizens, some are still confused about what's really going on.

In his new book, No Place to Hide, Glenn Greenwald [writes](#):

The perception that invasive surveillance is confined only to a marginalised and deserving group of those “doing wrong” – the bad people – ensures that the majority acquiesces to the abuse of power or even cheers it on. But that view radically misunderstands what goals drive all institutions of authority. “Doing something wrong” in the eyes of such institutions encompasses far more than illegal acts, violent behaviour and terrorist plots. It typically extends to meaningful dissent and any genuine challenge. It is the nature of authority to equate dissent with wrongdoing, or at least with a threat.

The record is suffused with examples of groups and individuals being placed under government surveillance by virtue of their dissenting views and activism – Martin Luther King, the civil rights movement, anti-war activists, environmentalists. In the eyes of the government and J Edgar Hoover’s FBI, they were all “doing something wrong”: political activity that threatened the prevailing order.

The FBI’s domestic counterintelligence programme, Cointelpro, was first exposed by a group of anti-war activists who had become convinced that the anti-war movement had been infiltrated, placed under surveillance and targeted with all sorts of dirty tricks. Lacking documentary evidence to prove it and unsuccessful in convincing journalists to write about their suspicions, they broke into an FBI branch office in Pennsylvania in 1971 and carted off thousands of documents.

Files related to Cointelpro showed how the FBI had targeted political groups and individuals it deemed subversive and dangerous, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, black nationalist movements, socialist and communist organizations, anti-war protesters and various rightwing groups. The bureau had infiltrated them with agents who, among other things, attempted to manipulate members into agreeing to commit criminal acts so that the FBI could arrest and prosecute them.

Those revelations led to the creation of the Senate Church Committee, which concluded: “[Over the course of 15 years] the bureau conducted a sophisticated vigilante operation aimed squarely at preventing the exercise of first amendment rights of speech and association, on the theory that

preventing the growth of dangerous groups and the propagation of dangerous ideas would protect the national security and deter violence.”

These incidents were not aberrations of the era. During the Bush years, for example, documents obtained by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) revealed, as the group put it in 2006, “new details of Pentagon surveillance of Americans opposed to the Iraq war, including Quakers and student groups”. The Pentagon was “keeping tabs on non-violent protesters by collecting information and storing it in a military anti-terrorism database”. The evidence shows that assurances that surveillance is only targeted at those who “have done something wrong” should provide little comfort, since a state will reflexively view any challenge to its power as wrongdoing.

The opportunity those in power have to characterise political opponents as “national security threats” or even “terrorists” has repeatedly proven irresistible. In the past decade, the government, in an echo of Hoover’s FBI, has formally so designated environmental activists, broad swaths of anti-government rightwing groups, anti-war activists, and associations organised around Palestinian rights. Some individuals within those broad categories may deserve the designation, but undoubtedly most do not, guilty only of holding opposing political views. Yet such groups are routinely targeted for surveillance by the NSA and its partners.

One document from the Snowden files, dated 3 October 2012, chillingly underscores the point. It revealed that the agency has been monitoring the online activities of individuals it believes express “radical” ideas and who have a “radicalising” influence on others.

The NSA explicitly states that none of the targeted individuals is a member of a terrorist organisation or involved in any terror plots. Instead, their crime is the views they express, which are deemed “radical”, a term that warrants pervasive surveillance and destructive campaigns to “exploit vulnerabilities”.

Among the information collected about the individuals, at least one of whom is a “US person”, are details of their online sex activities and “online promiscuity” – the porn sites they visit and surreptitious sex chats with women who are not their wives. The agency discusses ways to exploit this information to destroy their reputations and credibility.

The NSA’s treatment of Anonymous, as well as the vague category of people known as “hacktivists”, is especially troubling and extreme. That’s because Anonymous is not actually a structured group but a loosely organised affiliation of people around an idea: someone becomes affiliated with Anonymous by virtue of the positions they hold. Worse still, the category “hacktivists” has no fixed meaning: it can mean the use of programming skills to undermine the security and functioning of the internet but can also refer to anyone who uses online tools to promote political ideals. That the NSA targets such broad categories of people is tantamount to allowing it to spy on anyone anywhere, including in the US, whose ideas the government finds threatening.

Greenwald [told](#) Democracy Now yesterday:

People are aware of J. Edgar Hoover’s abuses. The nature of that series of events is that the United States government looks at people who oppose what they do as being, quote-unquote, “threats.” That’s the nature of power, is to regard anybody who’s a threat to your power as a broad national security threat.

There has already been reporting that shows that—the document, for example, in the book that shows the NSA plotting about how to use information that it collected against people it considers, quote, “radicalizers.” These are people the NSA itself says are not terrorists, do not belong to terrorist organizations, do not plan terrorist attacks. They simply express ideas the NSA considers radical. The NSA has collected their online sexual activity, chats of a sexual nature that they’ve had, pornographic websites that they visit, and plans, in the document, on how to use this information publicly to destroy the reputations or credibility of those people to render them ineffective as advocates. There are other documents showing the monitoring of who visits the WikiLeaks website and the collection of data that can identify who they are. There’s information about how to use deception to undermine people who are affiliated with the online activism group Anonymous.

Recent stories show that Greenwald is right:

- [In 1972, the CIA Director Relabeled “Dissidents” As “Terrorists” So He Could Continue Spying On Them ... And Nothing Has Changed](#)
- [500 Years of History Shows that Mass Spying Is ALWAYS Aimed at Crushing Dissent](#)
- [“These Programs Were Never About Terrorism: They’re About Economic Spying, Social Control, and Diplomatic Manipulation. They’re About Power”](#)

And it’s not just spying ...

The government may treat anyone who challenges its policies [as terrorists](#). For example:

- The former head of the NSA and CIA [compared privacy advocates to terrorists](#)
- [Peaceful protest may be treated as terrorism](#) by the FBI
- [Questioning war](#) may be considered terrorism

The [indefinite detention law](#) may be used against American dissenters. Specifically, the trial judge in the lawsuit challenging the law had asked the government attorneys 5 *times* whether journalists like Pulitzer prize-winning reporter Chris Hedges could be indefinitely detained simply for interviewing and then *writing about* bad guys. The government [refused to promise](#) that journalists like Hedges won’t be thrown in a dungeon for the rest of their lives without any right to talk to a judge.

Constitutional attorney John W. Whitehead [writes](#):

No matter what the Obama administration may say to the contrary, actions speak louder than words, and history shows that the U.S. government is not averse to locking up its own citizens for its own purposes. What the NDAA does is open the door for the government to detain as a threat to national security anyone viewed as a troublemaker. According to government guidelines for

identifying domestic extremists—a word used interchangeably with terrorists, that technically applies to anyone exercising their First Amendment rights in order to criticize the government.

Daniel Ellsberg notes that Obama's claim of power to indefinitely detain people without charges or access to a lawyer or the courts is a power that even [King George – the guy we fought the Revolutionary War against – didn't claim](#). (And former judge and adjunct professor of constitutional law Andrew Napolitano points out that Obama's claim that he can indefinitely detain prisoners *even after they are acquitted of their crimes* is a power that even [Hitler and Stalin didn't claim](#).)

And the former top NSA official who *created* NSA's mass surveillance system says, "[We are now in a police state](#)".

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