



It's not the Stasi, but the NSA is bad enough

By: Gene Healy – November 18, 2013

Leave it to the Washington Post, this overgrown company town's paper of record, to put things in perspective.

Along with “how to get rich in the new Washington,” the WaPo website announced Nov. 18 that “NSA's got nothing on German Stasi.”

“Victims of the fearsome Communist East German secret police say: not so fast” to comparisons of National Security Agency spying with the Cold-War era Stasi, the Post reports.

The spy agency for the communist “German Democratic Republic” employed over a quarter of a million East Germans — nearly 1 in 50 — as agents or informants.

Anyone “who dared criticize their government” — even in private — “could wind up disappearing into its penal system for years.”

The Post quotes the director of Berlin’s prison museum saying “the Stasi was a lot worse.” So we’ve got that going for us.

Of course the Stasi was orders of magnitude worse than the National Security Agency. How comforting should that be?

We don’t need to invoke the Stasi to understand the dangers of the NSA’s dragnet data collection. We can look to our own Cold War history, when the political class built files on thousands of peaceful dissenters, swept up millions of Americans’ private communications and used the information gathered to amass and maintain power.

Under the NSA’s secret SHAMROCK project and its sister program, MINARET, Americans — including congressmen, protesters, and humor columnists — had their telegrams read, international phone calls tapped and secret files about them distributed to the FBI and other agencies the NSA viewed as its “customers.”

Liberal icon Jack Kennedy forged new frontiers in domestic surveillance, wiretapping steel executives who'd raised prices and members of the Washington press corps he suspected of accessing classified information.

In "Legacy of Ashes: The History of the CIA," journalist Tim Weiner notes, "long before Nixon created his plumbers' unit of CIA veterans to stop news leaks, Kennedy used the agency to spy on Americans."

Political intelligence gathered from wiretaps on lobbyists in 1961 "contributed heavily to the administration's success" in getting the sugar-quota bill it wanted, according to an internal FBI memo.

And there's a reason J. Edgar Hoover was able to run the FBI virtually unchecked for nearly four decades. As Richard Nixon put it: "Hoover's got files on everybody, g-----n it!" Hoover was "a master blackmailer," according to his former top lieutenant, William Sullivan.

In the bad old days, to plug leaks, blackmail congressmen and control dissenters, federal snoops had to gather content and metadata the old-fashioned way, through informants, stakeouts, break-ins and old-school wiretaps.

Today, there's no need for legions of informants. With NSA bulk collection of the data trails we create, we're potentially "snitching" on ourselves.

But let's suppose the NSA's current defenders are right, that there really aren't any hidden abuses, that we've made radical improvements in human nature since the Cold War era, and today's public servants would never be tempted to misuse the treasure trove of information they've accumulated.

Still, if we ever had people we couldn't trust running the government (imagine!) — what use could they make of the surveillance architecture we're building?

As my colleague Jason Kuznicki puts it, isn't it "insane to build the working parts of a repressive police state and leave them lying around?"

At least one of the former Stasi victims interviewed by the Post agrees. Roland Brauckmann, who "was locked away for 15 months in 1982 because he printed fliers for the Protestant church and the anti-nuclear movement" said that "he trusted no government to hold on to the minutiae of his daily life."

After all, "no one knows which kind of people will take power in the future."