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Gene Healy: Security cameras' slippery slope

By: [Gene Healy](#)
Examiner Columnist
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Times Square has 82 police surveillance cameras, but when jihadist Faisal Shahzad tried to set off a car bomb there May 1, they were no help in catching him. (Though they did provide some lefty bloggers with a momentary thrill when a false lead led to speculation about "Tea Party terrorism.")

That failure hasn't cooled public officials' camera craze, however. New York Police Department Commissioner Raymond Kelly wants an electronic eye on every block from Central Park to 34th Street, and New York Sen. Charles Schumer demanded \$30 million from the feds to help complete the Lower Manhattan Security Initiative, which includes a centralized camera network based on London's "Ring of Steel."

Actually, we have a lot to learn from the British. Over the last couple of decades, they've run a large-scale experiment with closed-circuit TV surveillance, and the results suggest that the security benefits aren't worth the cost in tax dollars and lost privacy.

In his 1941 essay, "England, Your England," George Orwell laid out some of the distinctive characteristics of the British national character, among them, that "the liberty of the individual is still believed in," and "the most hateful of all names in the English ear is Nosey Parker." One is struck, he wrote, by "the privateness of English life."

Today, not so much. Driven by fears of Irish Republican Army terrorism, the British Home Office spent nearly 80 percent of its criminal justice budget in the 1990s on surveillance technology.

Today, the U.K. has more than 4 million cameras, one for every 14 Britons. In London, with its million CCTV units, the average citizen can be recorded more than 300 times a day.

In 1787, utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham dreamed up "a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind," the "Panopticon" -- a building designed so that all the occupants could be monitored from a central point, "always feel[ing] themselves as if under inspection." This would work well in prisons, Bentham thought, but also in schools and factories.

There's more than a little of Bentham's vision in Britain's burgeoning surveillance state.

The Panopticon's no panacea, though. True, video footage helped Scotland Yard capture the 7/7 bombers in 2005, even if it didn't deter the attack. Otherwise, the Brits have little to show for a program that's cost more than a half-billion pounds over the last decade.

An internal study by London police showed that for every 1,000 cameras, fewer than "one crime is solved per year" using video evidence. A 2005 report by the British Home Office found the camera systems had "little overall effect on crime levels."

Maybe what's needed is -- more cameras! This year, British police began using unmanned aerial vehicles as "eyes in the sky" for such tasks as "monitoring anti-social driving" and illegal dumping. "The BAE Systems-designed craft have been used by Derbyshire police to monitor political rallies," a Liverpool news site reports.

In 2004, Richard Thomas, Britain's information commissioner, the official who reports to Parliament about privacy issues, publicly worried that the U.K. risked "sleepwalking into a surveillance society." Indeed, the nonprofit group Privacy International ranks the U.K. as the worst of the Western democracies at protecting privacy, with a record only slightly better than Russia's.

We're a few years behind our trans-Atlantic cousins, but we're catching up. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has bought anti-terror cameras for towns as small as Liberty, Kan. (pop. 95), and Dillingham, Alaska, which is too small for a streetlight, but big enough for 80 DHS-funded cameras. Is any of this necessary? We could use more public debate on that question, before we sleepwalk into a surveillance society of our own.

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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