



'No place to hide' from NSA, then or now

By Gene Healy

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Bad news for pandaphiles: The National Zoo's "PandaCam" will go dark during a government shutdown.

However, the federal government's power to keep an eye on the American people will continue to grow — it's an "essential service," apparently.

Sunday brought yet another revelation from former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden. Since 2010, the New York Times reports, the NSA has been exploiting its vast databases to create "sophisticated graphs of some Americans' social connections that can identify their associates, their locations at certain times, their traveling companions and other personal information."

On Friday, the Hill published a document from the NSA inspector general providing details on several occasions in which analysts spied on current or former paramours.

The NSA's informal nickname for this is "LOVEINT." In one case, for example, "on the subject's first day of access to the SIGINT system, he queried six email addresses belonging to a former girlfriend, a U.S. person." He got a demotion and two months' reduced pay.

In 2008, a former Navy intercept operator stationed at a NSA facility described how his colleagues used to pass around highlights of soldiers' phone calls home from Iraq.

The word would go out that "there's good phone sex or there's some pillow talk, pull up this call, it's really funny."

LOVEINT abuses are comparatively small-time, but they hint at the dangers endemic to our burgeoning Surveillance State: Information is power; the modern NSA's capabilities are indescribably powerful and power corrupts.

Just last week, a government declassification panel released new information about the Cold War-era NSA spying on Americans.

Under “Project Minaret,” watchlisted Americans had their international phone calls and telegrams monitored by the NSA, and “even the most unlikely names would become targets perhaps because they were prominent, influential, and had expressed what the president considered subversive thoughts.”

The newly declassified intel reveals that among the targets were Martin Luther King Jr., boxer Muhammad Ali, New York Times D.C. bureau chief Tom Wicker, Washington Post humorist Art Buchwald and former Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker, R-Tenn.

Baker’s presence on the watch list is a mystery, but the first four were vocal critics of the Vietnam War.

Much of what we know about Minaret comes from reports compiled by the 1975-76 Senate Select Committee on intelligence abuses, popularly known as the "Church Committee" after committee chairman Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho. It turns out that Church had also been an NSA target.

Years before Snowden described the NSA’s powerful surveillance architecture as “a turnkey totalitarian state,” Church warned in a 1975 appearance on "Meet the Press":

“The technological capacity that the intelligence community has given the government could enable it to impose total tyranny, and there would be no way to fight back because the most careful effort to combine together in resistance to the government ... is within the reach of the government to know.”

There would, he said, be “no place to hide.”

Given the state of the technology at the time, Church’s warning might have appeared alarmist or at least premature. Most of the illegal spying the Church Committee documented was conducted the old fashioned way, through hidden microphones, letters steamed open by the CIA and reels of telegraphic tape copied by NSA agents.

Today, as my colleague Julian Sanchez puts it, the new spy machine is constructed “from the fiber-optic cables leading into secret rooms in telecom offices, where sophisticated 'semantic analyzers' filter all our Internet traffic. It's built from the multi-billion terabyte servers” at the NSA's new Utah data facility.

If that machine is turned against us, Church's warning may prove prophetic because there may indeed be “no place to hide.”

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