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May 7, 2010

## [Times Square Evacuated Again: So What About NYC's Anti-Terror Surveillance Campaign?](#)

by [Mark Bergen](#) posted @1:40 PM



Today, a week after an major attempted terrorist bombing, Times Square was evacuated due to a "suspicious package"—a "white cooler" found at [46th and Broadway](#). About 1:50 p.m., the bomb squad arrived. In the end, it turned out to be a false alarm—the seventh since Saturday. And as for the previous real attempts—well, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab and Faisal Shahzad were both, thankfully, woefully incompetent at actual terror. But they did prove effective at spurring furious debates over national security, civil liberties, and citizenship that make Glenn Beck appear sane. (Although, I'm pretty sure that was not their intent.) Now Shahzad—perhaps to confirm his resume's boast of being "result-oriented"—may help to ensure that every inch of Midtown is covered by an omniscient, unblinking eye. Times Square is already a panopticon. Still: is it worthwhile to put the entire island under surveillance? Are cameras a logical solution, or an invasive waste? Does mass surveillance mean the terrorists won?

After the Times Square incident, Mike Bloomberg responded admirably. He was on the scene, professional and mayoral, for a 2:00 a.m. presser. His statements [invoked](#) a Gotham calm, without any demagoguery or fear-mongering. He went after gun-rights absolutists. He took some flak for [suggesting](#) the suspect might be a "mentally deranged" Tea Partier, but I appreciated it. At least he wasn't reflexively faulting Muslims or pandering to "real America."

But Bloomberg also seized the opportunity to push for the expansion of his prized Lower Manhattan Security

Initiative (LMSI), a phalanx of post-9/11 surveillance equipment implemented in 2007. Back in October, 2009, before the underwear bomber and the tinted Connecticut SUV, Bloomberg [announced](#) he had set aside \$110 million to expand the LMSI into Midtown. A network of security cameras and license plate readers [would](#) studiously "record and track every vehicle moving between 34th and 59th Streets, river to river." To kick off the plan, the NYPD secured a \$24 million contract from the Department of Homeland Security.

Bloomberg's proposal, coupled with Shahzad's idiocy, has reignited a policy dispute over the impact of contemporary surveillance. As usual, the two sides in the debate are separated by an insurmountable gulf: one sees a commonsense counter-terrorism measure; the other, a Foucauldian nightmare.

Michael Sheehan, the former NYPD Deputy Commissioner of Counterterrorism, [brought](#) his expertise and thinktankery to *The Daily Beast* to call for more cameras. His writing is a little dry, and certainly not as fascinating as blog posts from [other](#) former NYPD boss. (Bernie Kerik, for what its worth, has an [opinion](#) on Shahzad, too. The episode, he sputters, is a perfect excuse to fix our immigration system: "We really really need to wake up.") Sheehan begins by recalling a trip he took with the force to London to absorb their "state-of-the-art" surveillance system. It, he opines, deters crime and serves as a "critical reconnaissance tool" for police. Our LMSI is, indeed, modeled after the system in the UK—although their name, "Ring of Steel," is clearly superior.

Thing is, some over on Knifecrime Island don't find their Ring of Steel to be that effective. "It's been an utter fiasco," [said](#) UK Inspector Mick Neville two years ago. He was referring to the country's pricey investment in closed-circuit TVs, which has only [netted](#) 1 crime for every 1,000 cameras. For Neville, the cameras are wasteful because criminals have surmised that they are ineffective, and so carry on undeterred.

Here, opponents are taking on the camera proliferation as another ill-advised security policy at the expense of our woebegone civil rights. The buoyant NY Civil Liberties Union filed lawsuits against the NYPD and DHS to unveil the full extent of their secretive surveillance plan. After 9/11, scores of cameras popped up all over the city. In a 2005 [report](#) (pdf), the NYCLU found 4,176 below 14th St., not to mention the additional 4,313 in our subways. These cameras have been known to do amazing things like [spot couples having sex](#) and [be broken](#) all the time. Here's an [interactive map](#) of the cameras in Lower Manhattan.

Even with an expansion, NYC may not be the most surveilled city. Chicago takes the [honors](#) for most-watched metropolis, which the editors at the *Tribune* don't [seem to mind](#).

Libertarian blogger Julian Sanchez doggedly covers these surveillance issues. He [scolds](#) the calls for trumped up security measures as a crass invasion of privacy and wasteful government spending. Privacy concerns carry a little less gravitas when *everyone* has a recording device and you're, again, in Times Square. Staunch libertarians can come off, when on the subject of governance, as a trifle paranoid. But when they're on, they're spot on (see: wiretapping, warrantless). Sanchez rightly points out that there is a considerable difference "between merely being recorded and knowing that an automated behavioral analysis algorithm is apt to send up a red flag if any of your actions trigger a program's definition of 'suspicious behavior.'" And as Slate coyly [demonstrated](#), spotting "suspicious behavior" in Times Square is an awfully easy pursuit.

Then, of course, there is the matter of efficacy. Cameras have helped sleuths in places like parking lots. But deterring petty crime is one thing. Stopping terrorists attacks is another. (See also: London.) If Shahzad were to have succeeded in his bastardly plot, the security camera footage wouldn't be worth much at all. Even with expanded surveillance, his SUV, since it was not reported stolen, would not have been flagged. Video surveillance in Times Square did capture the brief "person of interest"—that 40-something bald man.

Shahzad was not reigned in by any of the 82 city cameras in Times Square, but by a "trail of low-tech clues," a *Globe* columnist [points](#) out. (Apparently, security cameras don't work as a deterrent in Boston either.) One anonymous official [contends](#) that publicizing the video of baldy actually served to lull Shahzad into a false sense of security, if you will. But some of the footage the NYPD used from the scene was taken from a tourist. Police can, Sanchez argues, employ these citizen recordings "without creating a centrally controlled surveillance architecture."

Where Sanchez eyes a frightful security structure, Sheehan sees a paragon of safety. The LMSI, he writes, "provides a forum" for the NYPD to collect the best intelligence for top-notch security measures. He also argues on fiscal grounds, which is, I suppose, the only way you can form a policy position nowadays. Sheehan prods Obama and Congress to get in on the act, demanding they "reallocate funding from other less important areas." What are those "other less important areas"? Meh. Doesn't matter. His plea is [seconded](#) by Rick Lazio, our nativist ~~Democrat~~ Republican candidate for Governor.

Simply adding more cameras would just swell the sea of information our counterterrorism agencies already handle. And as Spencer Ackerman [deftly explained](#) after the last failed terrorist event, the issue is not inadequate intelligence—but faulty policy to share and act upon this intelligence. Doling out massive funds for surveillance is a heavy-handed response, ushered in to show someone is doing *something*. It bites particularly hard as our city budget takes an axe to [public libraries](#) and [6,700 teachers](#). Despite reasonable practical objections, the social cost is also not to be ignored. Our own Ring of Steel will soon arrive. Disturbingly, constant surveillance is being presented much as the Patriot Act was—as an indisputable necessity that only incidentally sidesteps civil liberties. The right of people to come and go uncounted, the time-honored tradition of privacy amid a mass of people, now disappears like a sex-shop from Times Square.

[Mark Bergen](#) goes places you'll never know about.

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1. [Multiphasic](#) [#411]

*Mark Bergen goes places you'll never know about.*

Oh fuck, does *everyone* have a secret taqueria now?

[Posted on 05/07/10 at 2:00 pm](#) [Log in to Reply](#)



o [mmmark](#) [#4458]

If only!

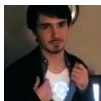
[Posted on 05/07/10 at 4:20 pm](#) [Log in to Reply](#)



2. [TheWaltonFirm](#) [#1362]

Whatever side of this debate we take, the one thing we can't do is pretend the technology doesn't exist. We need to get legislation in place regarding how surveillance can be used now, *before* the systems are completely constructed. When a whole mess of brand new technology is built in a vacuum of legal clarity, the door is wide open for abuse.

[Posted on 05/07/10 at 2:04 pm](#) [Log in to Reply](#)



3. [DoctorDisaster](#) [#1970]

Cogent, thoughtful, and correct. Thus, sure to be ignored by homeland security blowhards.

Also, needs more knifecrime jokes.

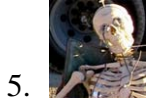
[Posted on 05/07/10 at 2:15 pm](#) [Log in to Reply](#)



4. [HiredGoons](#) [#603]

So now that Times Square is emptied, can I go eat my lunch outside?

[Posted on 05/07/10 at 2:23 pm](#) [Log in to Reply](#)



5. [BadUncle](#) [#153]

FWIW, the Ring of Steel cameras were able to track the 7/7/05 bombers. Uh, after the fact. Oh well.

[Posted on 05/07/10 at 2:23 pm](#) [Log in to Reply](#)



6. [TerseNursePornstein](#) [#58]

A cooler in [Times Square?](#) Why, that's [ridiculous!](#)

[Posted on 05/07/10 at 3:02 pm](#) [Log in to Reply](#)

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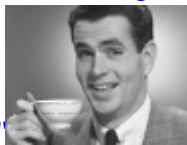
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