

From Inside the Bubble
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From Inside the Bubble

SIR RICHARD DEARLOVE

JOHN KEOGH

CAMBRIDGE, England—For 38 years, I worked in a world governed by rules of secrecy. Knowledge was compartmented and needing to know something was the principle that governed one's right to know it. Did that system serve a useful purpose? Unequivocally it did. It was there to protect, in perpetuity if necessary, the identity of the sources, human and technical, that provided the intelligence that contributed to the creation of effective defense, foreign, and national security policies. Did that useful purpose in turn serve the public interest and the interests of individual citizens? It would be difficult to argue that it did not, particularly when the overarching threat that those policies were designed to counter was for the majority of my intelligence career thermonuclear obliteration. Why today are we apparently so uncertain about a government's need for secrecy? Why are those who set out to challenge that secrecy portrayed by some as heroes? Whistleblower or traitor, opinion is divided.

Today, two factors undermine public acceptance of a government's right to hide knowledge from its citizens.

First, the power of government has been diffused by use of the Internet and mobile telephony. Instant access to a global network has made each of us potentially influential in a way that was unimaginable even a generation ago. Our natural propensity to question, to challenge, and to compare has been massively empowered but in a manner that is completely indiscriminate. The most intransigent of extremists now have an infinite capacity to make their voices heard and to seek out those who may have sympathy with their views. As a consequence, a Julian Assange or an Edward Snowden is provided with a global platform, extended by media amplification. With today's technological tools, they can access areas where they were never meant to wander. There are still too many holes in the state's need-to-know defenses.

Second, add to this mix our passion for individual rights, often pursued at the expense of the public interest (witness the months of litigation before the terrorist suspect Abu Qatada could be deported from the United Kingdom to Jordan), and one begins to understand why government secrecy, always an orphan in a democratic state and always in need of a guardian, is so much at a disadvantage. Current civic fashion is also all about transparency and therefore pushing public opinion in the opposite

direction. Little surprise therefore that the use of secrecy in government is on the back foot and struggling to justify itself.

The new threats to national security are no longer only about the competing interests of nation states. How to counter them is not about deterrence or developing and building appropriate weapons systems. Conflicts are well on their way

to losing their frontlines. They may come at us from inside society. When threats become our neighbors, they enjoy the same quality of life advantages that we do. Finding them and tracking them is therefore massively complicated, a task for government which most of us probably feel should be

carried out methodically and not left to chance. It requires the construction of a capability to sift through the huge communications wake that our ship of life leaves behind. If there is another way of doing this, no one has yet thought of it.

The worst has yet to happen and may never happen, but when we know that terrorists have investigated viruses, fissile and radiological materials, chemicals, aircraft, vehicles, and ordinary explosives to build their weapons, countering threats requires a lot of fine-meshed nets to be widely cast.

BIG BROTHER

Each of us has an instinctive dislike of Big Brother. I lived for four years (albeit as a Western diplomat) in Communist Czechoslovakia. To observe, the control and op-

COUNTERING THREATS REQUIRES A LOT OF FINE-MESHED NETS TO BE WIDELY CAST.

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pression that such a government could exercise over every aspect of daily life for every citizen was deeply disturbing. A recurrent nightmare was to wake up and discover that one was caught there and could not leave. None of us want to be watched, followed, or eavesdropped on, and ideally none of us should be if we are law abiding. Our laws that protect us against that are generally robust. However, we don't need to be so libertarian as to reject the right of the government to do the sort of bulk sifting and searching that I have described. The moment the government fails in its task of protecting its citizens, the political machinery to apportion blame will be cranked into action. After all, it must be someone's fault.

Something has gone wrong in trying to maintain the delicate balance between secrecy and security, and I would suggest that it is our loss of trust in elected politicians. We are suspicious that to allow them too much of a free hand will inevitably lead to abuse of power. The loss of trust, of course, has many causes. However, the particular cause relevant here is the government's forfeiture of the moral high ground in the way the extremist terrorist threat has been tackled. When the U.S. government operates at the margins of the law, in areas where many lawyers are concerned that it may well be acting illegally, why should we expect it to remain above the law in respecting the rights of its citizens in matters where it can hide beneath a thick carapace of secrecy?

Someone of my own background would usually default to giving the government the benefit of the doubt, but I quite understand the general contemporary reluctance to do so and the consequent furore of objections to the activities that Snowden has exposed. On both sides of the argument, of course, there is moral force. The

government knows it has a difficult job to do and believes it is doing it in the public interest, but the individuals who make up the public interest want much more transparency about what is being done on their behalf and also reassurance that in the process their right to privacy is not being trampled by an overbearing state. Furthermore, the government also knows this is an area where transparency is not really possible. Too much explanation about its capacities would be self-defeating, rendering those same capabilities less effective.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

In the later stages of the Cold War, when disarmament negotiations were obstructed by lack of mutual trust, "confidence building measures" were the mechanism used to prevent a breakdown. In the past, we have enjoyed a type of civic contract that allowed government significant areas of secrecy because citizens trusted they would not be abused. Clearly today that contract has broken down. Perhaps we need a new set of confidence building measures. These cannot be built with politicians, the very cause of our mistrust at the moment.

The answer may be some sort of independent scrutiny of government secrecy that can reassure citizens about what is done in their names without their detailed knowledge. What is sure, however, is that should we push for complete transparency and insist on the sovereignty of our individual rights, we would eventually regret it. Much worse than 9/11 could happen. The terrorists have not stopped trying—witness the horrific bombing of the Boston Marathon this year. For the most part, we have simply got better at stopping them, but at a cost. We have to be persuaded that the cost is worthwhile, and at the moment too many of us are not sure. ●