

## The United States of Surveillance

A friend of mine (we'll call him 'Sarge') is very worried, not just about the Coronavirus, mind you, but more about the coming self-acceptance of surveillance as we move towards 'contact tracing.' In case you don't know what that is, contact tracing is the systematic and organized action of keeping tabs on people who have been in contact with people who have had the Coronavirus or have it themselves. According to Sarge, it is yet another attempt by government to keep a watchful eye on where we go and with whom we associate. It's an extension of the Census, the income tax, the radio frequency chip imbedded in our credit cards, the holograms in our passports and what Sarge calls, 'the mobile ankle bracelet' commonly known as the cellphone.

Before you label my friend as a crackpot, think about all the ways local or federal authorities can track you and record you: CCTV surveillance (the Brits are big on this), cellphone triangulation, drones in the sky, data gathering for database compilation, monitoring of social media, the imposition of business and other licenses, etc. Think of the power that we've given the authorities via our laws like the Patriot Act, for example. On a state level, look at the executive power grabs that have shut down private businesses and now, just recently, created a quasi-martial law situation in the northwestern New Mexico town of Gallup (pop. 20,000) where the Governor has, essentially locked down the city and barred non-residents from entering it!

And it's not just governments that love tracking the populace. Retailers see both in-store and online surveillance as the next big wave of attracting customers to their sites. Here's an example. You're in a typical big box or department store. You're only there for a few items and want to spend only a few minutes getting the things on your list when all of a sudden - as you're looking at your list on your mobile phone - up pops a message from the store that says, "Did you know that you're only a few feet away from our daily special on 'X'?" You stop, and look around. Sure enough, only a few feet away is a big point of sale display for the latest 'X.' How did that happen? GPS, that's how...the satellite-based, Global Positioning System or GPS, former province of the U.S. military. Now it's used by a multitude of private companies (thanks to former President Bill Clinton's release of the technology).

Sarge tells me that the Covid-19 pandemic is the straw that broke the civil liberty camel's back. Soon we will be required to bear a national identity card that will contain a tiny chip or a holographic image of our medical history (possibly indicating our contagion risk for transmitting the Coronavirus to our fellow citizens). Most Americans do not realize that many other countries mandate the carrying of national identity cards on their person, but that we don't...as yet. The closest American citizens come to having such a form of identity is a Social Security Card, but even that is not required to be carried by us. Back when we had a military draft, it was the law that each young man 18 years of age or older who was subject to conscription was required by law to have that card on his person. Now that the draft is no more, that requirement went out the window.

There is one group that IS required to bear an ID card on their person in the U.S. and that is 'Green Card' (Permanent Resident non-citizens) holders. Anyone here as a permanent resident, authorized by Customs and Immigration MUST carry this card with them at all times. (U.S. citizens and illegal aliens are exempt.)

Technology has opened up a whole new world of surveillance or personal identification possibilities. Look at fingerprint scanning, retinal scanning, DNA testing. All are commonly used by companies and government authorities. But the BIG one is the CCTV or closed circuit television (camera). As I mentioned, the British have taken this technology to new heights. It is estimated that there are around a half-million cameras in London alone, and in the entire UK there could be approximately 4-6 million of them (estimate by the British Security Industry Association or BSIA). Compare London's 500K cameras for a population of over 8.7 million people to New York City's 18K for a population of 8.4 million people and you can see how enamored the Brits are with surveilling their own citizens.

Germany has an interesting rule about ID cards. Every person in Germany over the age of 16 is required to have a national identity card (Personalausweis) or a passport, but they are not required to carry one or the other on their person. Should they be detained by the authorities, however, they are required to produce it at some point before they're released. The Germans are understandably hesitant to force restrictions on their people that would smack of excessive government control given their history of rounding up 'undesirables' in WWII and by East Germany's 'Stasi' (the State Security Police) that kept detailed records on its citizens and tracked them. The German government is still forbidden to share databases with its agencies under a law (Datenschutz) that protects the privacy of its citizens.

Here in the U.S., we have the 'HIPAA' law (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) that was established in 1996 to insure that sensitive patient health information is not disclosed without the patient's consent or knowledge. To quote from the Health and Human Services Department, "The Privacy Rule applies to all forms of individuals' protected health information, whether electronic, written, or oral. The Security Rule is a Federal law that requires security for health information in electronic form." I asked Sarge about how difficult it would be to change the HIPAA law in order to institute a national health card system. He said, "How hard was it for over 35 states' governors to lock down their states and their states' economies, all in the name of *public health emergencies*?"

I had to admit, he had a point. In times of real or perceived crises, our governors have enormous power, and when you couple that with a real or imagined fear on the part of the population of infection from a deadly virus, it's easy to understand how our civil liberties could be the baby that's thrown out with the bath water.

There is a tendency among people who hold a 'collective over the individual' view that more control and order is ultimately better for a society than less control. We who prefer to protect the rights of the individual thinking that that which benefits the individual ultimately benefits society at large, are prone to push back at government overreach. Granted, there are always dangers in every crisis, but it's those not directly related to the crises themselves that tend to worry me more, such as the perceived need to 'track and record' us and our movements. Sarge said something very poignant and true as we ended our conversation. He said, "The only reasonable responses to a crisis must be rooted in a basic understanding of human nature. Absent that, you better have a damn good backup plan." I had to agree, and said that he sounded a lot like Benjamin Franklin who said, "Those who would give up essential liberty, to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety." We then put our masks back on, bumped elbows and went our separate ways, a little wiser for the conversation.

*Stephan Helgesen is a retired career U.S. diplomat who lived and worked in 30 countries for 25 years during the Reagan, G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, and G.W. Bush Administrations. He is the author of ten books, four of which are on American politics and he has written over 1,000 articles on politics, economics and social trends. He can be reached at: [stephan@stephanhelgesen.com](mailto:stephan@stephanhelgesen.com)*