

Munk Debate on State Surveillance Summary

By Glenn Greenwald

Debating the surveillance state requires that one first be clear about what it is and, more importantly, what it is not. Nobody opposes *targeted* surveillance: meaning invading the communications of individuals credibly believed to be plotting terrorist attacks or other threats to legitimate national security.

But that has almost nothing to do with the actual surveillance state created, in the dark, by the U.S. and its four English-speaking surveillance allies (the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand). This actual surveillance system is expressed by the National Security Agency's (NSA) own slogan which appears repeatedly throughout its own documents: *collect it all*.

That is an apt phrase. It describes exactly what the NSA's objective is: to eliminate privacy worldwide by collecting and storing all electronic communications that take place between all human beings on the planet. It is devoted to sweeping up every email, every telephone call, every Google search, every browsing activity, and every online transaction in which people engage. That is not hyperbole: the NSA's own documents leave no doubt that this is exactly its mission.

It is, in sum, the most invasive and sweeping system of *suspicionless* surveillance ever built. It is designed to ensure that the communications of everyone - not terrorists, not violent criminals, not arms dealers, but *everyone* - is subject to being read, listened to and otherwise monitored by unseen, unchecked officials of the national security state.

"Terrorism" is the pretext, not the cause or justification, of this sprawling system. Indeed, over the past 12 years, the U.S. has left no doubt that it yells "the terrorists" as a means of scaring populations into submitting to whatever it wants to do, no matter how radical and destructive.

"Terrorism" was the phrase used to justify the American torture regime, the due-process-free imprisonment of people at Guantanamo, the aggressive invasion

and subsequent destruction of Iraq, kidnapping people through "renditions", and a whole slew of other extremist and previously unthinkable assertions of force carried out in secret. And now it is the fear-mongering slogan hauled out to justify why a small set of governments should be collecting and monitoring the communications of everyone who uses the internet or a telephone.

It should be no surprise, then, that even numerous independent tribunals of the U.S. government itself have concluded that claims of "terrorism" do not remotely justify the surveillance programs. Within the last four months, a federal court, a body of experts appointed by President Barack Obama to help reform the NSA, two Senators from Obama's own party who serve on the Intelligence Committee, and the President's long-standing Privacy and Civil Liberties Board have all vehemently rejected the assertion that these NSA programs are helpful in stopping terrorists plots. Both the court and Board concluded illegal - even Obama himself now says must stop.

The revelations enabled by Edward Snowden over the past 10 months - by themselves - leave no doubt that "terrorism" is a tactic used to justify this system, not its actual purpose. Those documents have exposed systematic, highly invasive surveillance of the communications within oil companies and energy ministries in Brazil, western banking systems, and even the democratically elected leaders of America's closet allies.

But most of all, the Snowden documents have revealed the actual target of this system: entire populations of innocent, law-abiding people who have done nothing wrong, and who should not have their private communications and other acts collected and stored by distant governments operating in secret. They even include the spying government's own citizens, en masse, who now know that the vast bulk of this system is devoted to sweeping up and storing massive amounts of their own private activities.

This is the stuff of which science fiction writers from many decades ago - Orwell and Huxley - urgently warned. Indeed, this system of ubiquitous surveillance - exploiting the promise of the internet to render *all* electronic communications and activities susceptible to state monitoring - exceeds what they were able to

envision even as their grimest scenarios.