

“Total Information Awareness”, Corporate Corruption, Repression, and the Big “F”

by Coleen Rowley

Since we all tend to reflexively cringe whenever someone mentions the “F” topic, I’m going to try and minimize some of the natural revulsion and denial by writing the full word that we usually fear to name only once: fascism.

The very easy answer to why and how F is presently developing was actually answered in 1795 by “the Father of the U.S. Constitution” and our fourth president, James Madison, who observed: “Of all the enemies to public liberty war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other. War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes; and armies, and debts, and taxes are the known instruments for bringing the many under the domination of the few. In war, too, the discretionary power of the Executive is extended; its influence in dealing out offices, honors, and emoluments is multiplied; and all the means of seducing the minds are added to those of subduing the force of the people. The same malignant aspect in republicanism may be traced in the inequality of fortunes, and the opportunities of fraud, growing out of a state of war, and in the degeneracy of manners and of morals engendered by both. No nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare.”

In the 9th year in what’s become the seemingly unending “War on Terror” (comprising real wars on Afghanistan, Iraq, and other Middle East countries), we American citizens have consequently given up numerous liberties in the vain pursuit of absolute security, validating the prediction of another founding father, Benjamin Franklin, that those who attempt to trade their liberty for greater security will have neither.

Hard-core repressive police state tactics involving domestic use of the military have only occasionally emerged, however—for instance, during certain National Security Special Events. F grade repression is not close to being a fact of daily life (yet). How, then, has the government been able to keep the momentum going for hugely expensive and unpopular wars that have pushed the country into a permanent war economy—where much of our only remaining manufacturing resides in military bombs/weaponry and a large segment of the decent-paying jobs exists in the “all-volunteer” military? How has the growing disparity between the masses of ordinary people losing their jobs, pensions, health care, and homes and the clear ties to corruption of government by moneyed special and corporate interests not yet led to serious social unrest?

To be sure, our large-scale system of prison warehousing always plays a role in tamping down social unrest. And a little official intimidation goes a long way. It’s slowly being ramped up. For instance, the small fines customarily imposed for minor offenses of improperly posting flyers about upcoming rallies have now

become draconian penalties amounting to thousands of dollars. Peace activists who simply lie down on the sidewalk in front of the White House are being thrown in the terrible "D. C. lockup" for a day or more. "Minnesota Patriot Act" law, passed after 9-11, now defines causing minor property damage as an act of "terrorism."

We experienced a form of police state intimidation firsthand in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul when vague threats of "anarchism" were leaked to the press months before the 2008 Republican National Convention. A show of force by anonymous "robo-cops" ensued and, unsurprisingly, their threatened use of tasers, chemical weapons, and mass arrests materialized. Mass arrests of approximately 800 people at the RNC, including those of over 40 journalists (most of which were later dismissed due to lack of justification), took place, but the really bad result (which most citizens do not know) was the serious intimidation that had effectively reduced the number of participants marching that first day in St. Paul streets.

The "Total Information Awareness (TIA)" collection of private data on individuals was originally proposed after 9/11 by Admiral John Poindexter (convicted in the Iran-Contra affair) and falsely sold as a solution to prevent terrorism. Despite the lack of any evidence that TIA type programs "work" and are capable of effectively identifying actual terrorists through the vacuuming up of more data, they have taken root in the 16 different "intelligence" agencies. Just as Blackwater attempted to shed its bad image through a name change, so did TIA. Each newly minted acronym (which I do not have the space here to list) makes a false promise similar to the NIMD ("Novel Intelligence from Massive Data") one that allows billions more records to be collected, stored, and "data-mined." The NSA, for example, is reportedly building a new computer system the size of the National Capitol Building which will require more electricity than what Salt Lake City uses just to store its records, many of which probably emanate from the NSA's warrantless monitoring program that Congress recently legalized after the monitoring was illegally commenced by Bush. Prior Attorney General Guidelines that were enacted in the early 1980s after the Church Committee exposed abuses (such as J. Edgar Hoover's COINTELPRO) have largely been unceremoniously discarded to open the doors further. Although it's well known that the task of finding a needle in a haystack or "connecting the dots" is not made easier, but instead much harder, by adding more hay to the haystack, it has not stopped the newly burgeoning "Security-Surveillance Industrial Complex," which is as privatized as the military-industrial complex. In 2007, the FBI temporarily raised some eyebrows when it proposed quadrupling its Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE) database to ultimately collect 6 billion records, or 20 for each man, woman, and child in the U.S. While a National Academies of Science study refuted TIA's ability to achieve its stated objective to "proactively" mine the data to find terrorists using "predictive" analysis, nothing seems to stop such collections from proceeding. Private security and surveillance corporations have huge profit incentives to push to expand such programs, as they benefit from contracts with the government.

The average citizen does not suspect, however, that the government would waste such vast sums of his/her tax money on useless surveillance and data collection-mining systems to profit private companies to catch cases of minor property damages. The U.S. government intelligence agencies' massive "intelligence" collection serves to fuel and reinforce people's fears of "terrorism," as well as intimidate and scare the average citizen away from such basic good citizenship activities as marching, writing letters to the editor, blogging, joining activist or social networking groups (such as Facebook), or otherwise exercising their First Amendment rights.

Airport screening that increasingly includes equipment that effectively removes passengers' clothing to conduct full-body cavity screening has another pernicious impact. Reducing someone to a naked state and removing all semblance of personal privacy is actually one of the permissible "harsh interrogation tactics" touted by Cheney and his ilk as effective in "breaking" a suspect. Similarly, it is perhaps one of the most effective ways of demonstrating the absolute power of the state over an individual. Forcing individuals to remove their shoes is one thing, but forcing them to essentially become totally naked on a regular basis will not only destroy self-esteem but immediately create feelings of helplessness and powerlessness.

The current government intrusiveness in the name of the "War on Terror" threatens much more than mere loss of individual privacy. Everyone should be able to learn from history—specifically, the five decade-long, Cold War-induced period in America when the zealot F.B.I. director, J. Edgar Hoover, conducted guilt-by-association spying and disrupted First Amendment activities with COINTELPRO. Hoover's immense power over other government and nongovernment leaders (especially those he didn't like) was based on his collection of vast amounts of private information about them and his consequent ability to blackmail them by threatening to expose their information and secrets. Think about the daily exposés one reads involving sexual scandals, for instance, of elected government politicians caught routinely in bathrooms and brothels, and you might grasp the dangerous potential of this intrusive spying to thwart our democratic processes.

Up to now, the five main buttons that propagandists push to control and manipulate larger masses of people have worked quite well. Those in power have not had to resort much to the harsher forms of official repression. Pushing fear, hate, greed, false pride, and blind loyalty, actually in that order and on an almost 24-7 basis, has worked very well thus far: not only has it brought out the worst in some people, but it has also tamped down displays of dissent and social unrest.

But yes, Virginia, I do believe our young corporatocracy boat is sailing right into the perfect category F storm unless we, as a country, can quickly change course. Instead of allowing the propaganda tools to manipulate and bring out the worst in our citizens, we need to immediately encourage and strengthen the opposite traits: courage, love, generosity, humility, and critical thinking. We will need all of these to

cut through the mass apathy, desensitization, and political gaming that has currently put our country on the F course.

Coleen Rowley is a former FBI Agent. She holds a law degree, and served in Minneapolis as "Chief Division Counsel," a position which included oversight of Freedom of Information, as well as providing regular legal and ethics training to FBI Agents. In 2002, Coleen brought some of the pre 9-11 lapses to light and testified to the Senate Judiciary Committee about some of the endemic problems facing the FBI and the intelligence community. Rowley's memo to FBI Director Robert Mueller in connection with the Joint Intelligence Committee's Inquiry led to a two-year-long Department of Justice Inspector General investigation. Today, as a private citizen, she is active in civil liberties, and peace and justice issues.

Resources

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_Awareness_Office (we don't usually give wikipedia as a source, but this one is particularly good.)

http://www.pcworld.com/article/154870/security_civil_liberties_experts_question_datamining.html

http://blogs.abcnews.com/theblotter/2007/06/exclusive_fbi_d.html

<http://www8.nationalacademies.org/onpinews/newsitem.aspx?RecordID=10072008A>

http://books.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12452#toc

Beyond Fear (Copernicus Books, 2003) by Bruce Schneiere