

Richard Milhous W. Bush

From the Archive: Only public outrage global and domestic stands any hope of pushing back the National Security Agency's "surveillance state." As hard as that may be, there was success a decade ago disrupting President George W. Bush's Orwellian Total Information Awareness that Nat Parry described in 2002.

By Nat Parry (Originally published on Dec. 1, 2002, and edited for length and time elements)

In fall 2002, George W. Bush was fast building a political system of secrecy and snooping that Richard Milhous Nixon would have died for. After the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Bush asserted broad powers to wiretap, spy on and imprison indefinitely people he deemed a threat to national security authority far beyond what was available to the famously paranoid Nixon.

Bush's executive powers were so sweeping they may have been unprecedented in U.S. history. While some of Bush's supporters cited prior suspensions of constitutional rights during the Civil War and World War II, those eras lacked today's technology to pry into the most personal details of the lives of Americans.

The logo for the Information Awareness Office, which oversaw the Total Information Awareness project.

Even in the late 1960s and early 1970s, President Nixon and his allies were forced to adopt relatively crude means for invading the privacy of Americans. Bugs were placed on phones; agents were infiltrated into political organizations; and burglars were sent into homes and offices searching for embarrassing or incriminating information.

By contrast, modern technology let Bush's team collect and analyze trillions of bytes of data on transactions and communications, the electronic footprints left in the course of everyday life: books borrowed from a library, fertilizer bought at a farm-supply outlet, X-rated movies rented at a video store, prescriptions filled at a pharmacy, sites visited on the Internet, tickets reserved for a plane, borders crossed while traveling, rooms rented at a motel, and hundreds of other examples.

Bush's aides argued that their unrestricted access to this electronic data would help detect terrorists, but the data could prove even more useful in building dossiers on anti-war activists or blackmailing political opponents. Despite assurances that such abuses wouldn't happen again, the capability

presented a huge temptation for Bush, who has made clear his view that anyone not supporting his “war on terror” was siding with the terrorists.

In 2002, the technological blueprint for an Orwellian-style “thought police” was on the drawing board at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, the Pentagon’s top research and development arm. DARPA commissioned a comprehensive plan for electronic spying that would track everyone in the world who is part of the modern economy.

“Transactional data” would be gleaned from electronic data on every kind of activity “financial, education, travel, medical, veterinary, country entry, place/event entry, transportation, housing, critical resources, government, communications,” according to the Web site for DARPA’s Information Awareness Office. The program would then cross-reference this data with the “biometric signatures of humans,” data collected on individuals’ faces, fingerprints, gaits and irises. The project sought what it called “total information awareness.”

Masonic Eye

The Information Awareness Office even boasted a logo that looked like some kind of clip art from George Orwell’s *1984*. The logo showed the Masonic symbol of an all-seeing eye atop a pyramid peering over the globe, with the slogan, “scientia est potentia,” Latin for “knowledge is power.”

Though apparently unintentional, DARPA’s choice of a giant white pyramid eerily recalled Orwell’s Ministry of Truth, “an enormous pyramidal structure of glittering white concrete, soaring up, terrace after terrace, 300 metres into the air.” The all-seeing Masonic eye could be read as “Big Brother Is Watching.”

Former Vice President Al Gore and others noted these strange similarities both in style and substance with Orwell’s totalitarian world. “We have always held out the shibboleth of Big Brother as a nightmare vision of the future that we’re going to avoid at all costs,” Gore said. “They have now taken the most fateful step in the direction of that Big Brother nightmare that any president has ever allowed to occur.” [Times/UK, Nov. 22, 2002]

Besides the parallels to *1984*, the assurances about respecting constitutional boundaries were undercut by the administration’s provocative choice of director for the Information Awareness Office.

The project was headed by President Ronald Reagan’s former national security adviser John Poindexter, who was caught flouting other constitutional safeguards in the Iran-Contra scandal of the mid-1980s. Poindexter approved the sale of missiles to the Islamic fundamentalist government of Iran and the transfer of profits to Nicaraguan Contra rebels for the purchase of weapons, thus

circumventing the Constitution's grant of war-making power to Congress. Under U.S. law at the time, military aid was banned to both Iran and the Contras.

Noteworthy, too, the Iranian government – then as now – was listed by the U.S. government as a sponsor of international terrorism, and the Contras were widely regarded by human rights monitors as a terrorist organization responsible for the deaths of thousands of Nicaraguan civilians. One former Contra director, Edgar Chamorro, described the practice of seizing towns and staging public executions of Nicaraguan government officials. [For details, see Robert Parry's *Lost History*.]

In 1990, in federal court in Washington, Poindexter was convicted of five felonies in connection with the Iran-Contra scheme and the cover-up. But his case was overturned by a conservative-dominated three-judge appeals court panel, which voted 2-1 that the conviction was tainted by congressional immunity given to Poindexter to compel his testimony to Congress in 1987.

Though Poindexter's Iran-Contra excesses in the 1980s might be viewed by some as disqualifying for a sensitive job overseeing the collection of information about everyone on earth, DARPA said it seeks out such committed characters to run its projects. "The best DARPA program managers have always been freewheeling zealots in pursuit of their goals," the agency's Web site said.

Fewer Safeguards

While the Bush administration promised that this time there wouldn't be violations of constitutional protections, a marked difference between the Nixon era and the Bush era was that there were actually fewer institutional safeguards protecting the American people in 2002.

When Nixon was president, opposition Democrats held the congressional levers that permitted investigations into Nixon's domestic spying. The national news media also approached its duties with far more professionalism. The federal courts, too, were less partisan and less likely to rubber-stamp White House assertions of national security. In 2002, with all those institutional checks and balances either gone or substantially weakened, there was little to interfere with Bush's return to Nixon-style abuses or worse.

"Under authority it already has or is asserting in court cases, the administration, with approval of the special Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, could order a clandestine search of a U.S. citizen's home and, based on the information gathered, secretly declare the citizen an enemy combatant, to be held indefinitely at a U.S. military base," Washington Post legal affairs reporter Charles Lane wrote. "Courts would have very limited authority to

second-guess the detention, to the extent that they were aware of it.”

[Washington Post, Dec. 1, 2002]

Even in the face of the political constraints that existed four decades ago, Nixon mounted a systematic campaign to spy on and neutralize people he considered threats to his Vietnam War policies. Some of the domestic espionage against anti-war and black militant groups started in previous administrations, though Nixon intensified many of the operations out of a personal fury over challenges to his authority.

The Plumbers

When the FBI and the CIA drew lines on how far they were willing to go, Nixon turned to a private organization of ex-spooks dubbed the “Plumbers,” whose name came from their job of clamping down on leaks of information. They included G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt.

One of their assignments was to destroy the reputation of former Defense Department official Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the secret Pentagon Papers history of the Vietnam War, which chronicled the lies and deceptions that led the American people into the conflict. Nixon’s Plumbers broke into Ellsberg’s psychiatrist’s office searching for derogatory information about him. [For an inside account of the Pentagon Papers affair, see Daniel Ellsberg’s Secrets.]

Nixon operatives also tailed Sen. Ted Kennedy and undertook other political espionage. The Plumbers’ most notorious and ill-fated caper was breaking into the Watergate complex in Washington to put bugs on phones at the Democratic National Committee. On June 17, 1972, the operatives returned to fix bugs that weren’t working and were caught.

Nixon denied a connection to the burglars, but aggressive investigative reporting at the Washington Post and other news organizations exposed the secret White House links and the cover-up. On Aug. 9, 1974, his lies exposed by tape recorders he had placed in his own offices, Nixon resigned.

In retrospect, it is clear that Nixon was driven to order widespread domestic espionage by his rage over the Vietnam War protests as well as his personal paranoia. Nixon came to see public opposition to his policies as tantamount to aiding and abetting the enemy. [See, for instance, Robert Parry’s America’s Stolen Narrative.]

Different Men

In many ways, Richard M. Nixon and George W. Bush were different historical figures. Nixon came from a humble background and rose on the strength of his

intelligence, hard work and ruthlessness. Bush lived a life of privilege, a playboy in his youth, a heavy drinker, a failed businessman who was repeatedly bailed out by his father's friends, a politician who in author Frank Bruni's phrase was "ambling into history."

Like Nixon, however, Bush demonstrated a taste for the imperial powers of the presidency, including the authority to surround his actions with secrecy. Immediately after taking office in January 2001, Bush stopped the legally required release of documents from the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. Then, the new Bush White House engaged in secret meetings with Enron Corp. and other energy companies in developing a national energy policy, the records of which were kept secret.

After Sept. 11, 2001, Bush claimed unchecked power to jail American citizens and others deemed "enemy combatants" indefinitely without charges. They were denied their constitutional rights to a lawyer, to court review and to an opportunity for confronting an accuser.

American citizen Jose Padilla was arrested in Chicago and locked away in a Navy brig after Attorney General John Ashcroft accused him of plotting to detonate a radioactive bomb. No physical evidence was presented to support the charge, which was apparently based on a secret interview with a captured al-Qaeda operative. [Padilla was never prosecuted for the "dirty bomb" charge, although in 2007 he was convicted of unrelated charges of supporting terrorism overseas.]

During Campaign 2002, Bush also demonstrated a readiness to question the patriotism of Democrats, even though they supported the vast majority of his military actions in response to the Sept. 11 attacks.

In one ploy, Bush turned a Democratic plan for a homeland security department against them. After first resisting creation of the department, Bush embraced the plan. He then transformed a difference over civil service rules into an accusation that the Democratic-controlled Senate was "not interested in the security of the American people."

Republicans successfully portrayed Sen. Max Cleland, D-Georgia, as lacking patriotism although Cleland lost both legs and an arm serving in the Vietnam War. Bush urged voters to send him congressional allies who would stand shoulder to shoulder with him in the "war on terror" – and Republicans swept to victory in key race after key race.

Amid his political successes, Bush began viewing himself as the infallible leader whose judgments was beyond questioning. Like Nixon, Bush had tasted the nectar of presidential power.

When asked by author Bob Woodward if he ever explained his positions, Bush answered, "Of course not. I'm the commander in chief, I don't need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation." [Washington Post, Nov. 19, 2002]

'Fifth Columnists'

Like Nixon, Bush faced domestic protesters whom his supporters called "fifth columnists." Bush and many of his advisers were young men during the Vietnam War and favored the U.S. intervention while avoiding military service there. Some key hawks seemed to have been nursing personal grudges against the anti-war movement ever since.

Attorney General Ashcroft testified to Congress in December 2001 that those who object to "phantoms of lost liberty" only serve to "aid terrorists for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve." According to Ashcroft, those who question the administration's policies "give ammunition to America's enemies, and pause to America's friends."

After the Republican electoral sweep on Nov. 5, 2002, Bush was clearly in possession of the means, motive and opportunity to clamp down on traditional American civil liberties. The machinery was quickly being moved into place for a crackdown on those Americans whom Bush may judge to be not with him and thus with the terrorists.

[**Editor's Note:** Despite Bush's extraordinary power, widespread public criticism of Total Information Awareness led DARPA to change the name to "Terrorism Information Awareness" in 2003. But the semantic alteration did not solve TIA's PR problem and Congress voted to defund the project in 2003. However, parts of the operation simply were shifted to the top-secret National Security Agency and run under different names, with some of those surviving elements surfacing in recent days.]

Nat Parry is the co-author of *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush.* For more recent information about U.S. government policies that deviate from international norms, he recommends reading "Compliance Campaign."
