

A History of False Fear

It's always hard to get someone to speak honestly when his or her livelihood depends on not telling the truth. With the military-industrial-surveillance complex, that reality is multiplied by the billions of dollars and the many careers at stake, Joe Lauria writes.

By Joe Lauria

Despite the deep embarrassment and outrage caused by continuing revelations of the National Security Agency's abuse of power, meaningful reform is unlikely because at heart the Edward Snowden story is about money and political power. And Snowden has threatened both.

President Obama is considering adopting some NSA reforms recommended by a White House panel. But don't bet on him going too far.

Federal District Court Judge Richard Leon's ruling that the controversial NSA programs are "almost Orwellian" and may be unconstitutional is encouraging. Most telling was Leon's statement that the abusive NSA practices have not stopped one terrorist attack. But don't count on the government to suddenly start telling the truth about the real level of the terrorist threat.

False fear is what the entire operation is built on. If the disturbing NSA programs are ultimately judged unjustified and unconstitutional and have to be shut down or curtailed, billions of dollars in contracts and careers would be at stake. And that's why the government will continue to exaggerate the terrorism threat while pursuing Snowden.

It is the government's last line of defense: that the NSA must do these things to protect the American people from what is really a minimal threat. "National security" is the justification to collect every American's phone records, emails and Internet traffic and millions of other people's around the globe.

But is it the nation's security Snowden has risked, or the interests of a relatively few wealthy and powerful contractors and government officials? Terrorism exists. But are false fears of a rare attack whipped up to link those powerful interests with the entire population's to win their support?

First there was the color-coded terror alerts. Obama did away with that. But we still take our shoes off at the airport and get x-rayed. Tom Ridge, the first Homeland Security chief, said he was pressured to raise the terrorism alert for political reasons. He ran an entirely new \$40 billion-a-year department, with its own security force and private contracts, created because of a single major

attack.

When Boston was hit only the second significant attack in decades paramilitary police shut down the whole city and marched innocent people out of their homes at gunpoint. Many of what the government trumpets as disrupted plots over the past few years have been actually engineered by FBI informants, stoking more unnecessary fear. And politicians, law enforcement and the media constantly chatter about terrorism, as if the next attack could happen any minute.

A device goes off every day in Iraq, Pakistan and Syria. Britain endured an IRA bombing campaign. But there's nothing like that in the U.S. In fact you are nine times more likely to choke to death, eight times more likely to be killed by a cop, 1,048 times more likely to die in a car crash and 87 times more likely to drown than die in a terrorist attack.

Put another way, your risk of dying from a fireworks accident is 1 in 652,046. The risk from dying from terrorism is 14 times smaller. The State Department says only 17 Americans were killed by terrorists in 2011, and that includes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A History of Hype

Hyping fear that results in profit and political power unfortunately has a long history in the United States. Mass hysteria against imagined threats for the gain of a few is ingrained in American culture.

Playwright Arthur Miller criticized the anti-communist hype of McCarthyism in *The Crucible*, showing that orchestrated fear about phantom threats in order to benefit a select group of people reaches back to America's Puritan past.

To get the people behind a war that was of no concern to them but instead to a powerful and wealthy few, President Woodrow Wilson created the Creel Committee. It was a propaganda ministry that became the precursor of modern public relations. It whipped up American fear and hatred of Germans and anyone who opposed the war.

Wilson's repressive 1918 Seditions Act then made it a crime to use "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language" about the government, the flag or armed services during World War I.

As Brigadier General Smedley Butler said about the First World War: "Beautiful ideals were painted for our boys who were sent out to die. This was the 'war to end wars.' This was the 'war to make the world safe for democracy.' No one told them that dollars and cents were the real reasons. No one mentioned to them, as they marched away, that their going and their dying would mean huge war

profits." About American motives for entering the war, Butler said:

"The normal profits of a business concern in the United States are six, eight, ten, and sometimes twelve per cent. But wartime profits, ah! that is another matter, twenty, sixty, on hundred three hundred, and even eighteen hundred percent, the sky is the limit. All that traffic will bear. Uncle Sam has the money. Let's get it. Of course, it isn't put that crudely in wartime. It is dressed into speeches about patriotism, love of country, and 'we must all put our shoulder to the wheel,' but the profits jump and leap and skyrocket, and are safely pocketed."

Butler said the du Pont's average 1910-1914 profit of \$6 million a year soared to \$58 million a year from 1914 to 1918. "Take one of our little steel companies that so patriotically shunted aside the making of rails and girders and bridges to manufacture war materials," he wrote of Bethlehem Steel, whose average annual profits soared from \$6 million to \$49 million. Profits soared for a host of other industries, feasting on the taxpayers.

Fearing the Russians

After the Second World War, careers were built on the same kind of hysteria about communism that we are now seeing about terrorism. The Soviet Union was devastated by the war. Yet U.S. administrations inflated Moscow's military capabilities to get more military spending from Congress. That enriched a military industry that had pulled the U.S. out of the Depression.

Once the war was over the economy tanked again and there was widespread fear of a new Depression. Overblowing the Soviet threat saved the aircraft industry and military spending jumpstarted the post-war economy.

To build up this new, lucrative national security state, Truman instituted the first peacetime draft and transformed the Executive Branch, giving it much more power than the Constitution intended. In July 1947, Truman changed the country probably for good by signing the National Security Act. It set up the Defense Department, the National Security Council and the CIA. In 1952 he wrote a classified letter establishing the NSA.

A phony "missile gap," with the Soviets, bogus claims to Congress admitted by Gen. Lucius Clay that Moscow was planning war, and McCarthy's communist witch hunt were among the tactics used. They cemented the surveillance state at home and Cold War abroad, both yielding power for politicians and profits for military contractors.

With the end of the Cold War, the exaggerated terrorist threat became a convenient replacement for the Soviet Union. False fears of Saddam Hussein's

links to the 9/11 attack whipped up support for the illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq, which also did not threaten the U.S., creating a boondoggle for a plethora of new military contractors.

We saw attacks on French culture, including pouring wine down sewers hyped by the news media because France opposed the war.

James Bamford, our most experienced writer on the National Security Agency, points out that when you drive down the Baltimore-Washington Parkway past Fort Meade, behind the trees on your right is the vast campus of the NSA. But across the street on your left are the offices of the handful of private-sector contractors that have made a bundle off the so-called War on Terror.

An estimated 80 percent of the NSA's approximate \$10 billion annual budget goes to these contractors. Personnel changes hands too. James Clapper, the current director of national intelligence, was an executive at Snowden's former employer, Booz Allen Hamilton. Mike McConnell left Booz Allen to be the first DNI and then returned to it after he left government. Ex-CIA director James Woolsey works at the firm. The company is owned by the Carlyle Group, one of the biggest military contractors. Their incomes depend on the programs Snowden is exposing.

That stretch of the Parkway and a collection of military contractors near the Pentagon in northern Virginia form the nexus of the military-industrial cooperation fueled by exaggerated fear that President Dwight Eisenhower warned could threaten American democracy.

Truman's Admission

Less well known is President Truman's astounding admission. The man who was as responsible as anyone for hyping the Cold War wrote after reflecting on his life:

"The demagogues, crackpots and professional patriots had a field day pumping fear into the American people. Many good people actually believed that we were in imminent danger of being taken over by the Communists and that our government in Washington was Communist riddled. So widespread was this campaign that it seemed no one would be safe from attack. This was the tragedy and shame of our time."

The Soviet Union at least had a massive standing army and a nuclear arsenal. It fought proxy wars with the U.S., mostly in Africa and Asia. Terrorists do not have such capabilities.

Yet the government and established media (there are media careers at stake too)

hammer into us that terrorists pose an existential threat to the United States and that unconstitutional surveillance and perpetual war are therefore justified.

The rare public figure will admit the hype. *Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, testified to Congress in 2007 that it was a "simplistic and demagogic narrative" to compare the threat of Islamic terrorism to either Nazism or Stalinism. "Most Muslims are not embracing Islamic fundamentalism;" he said, "al Qaeda is an isolated fundamentalist Islamist aberration."*

A more realistic danger than terrorism to Americans is other Americans with guns. There are nearly 3,000 deaths by gunfire every month in the United States. That is one 9/11 every 30 days. Yet terrorism is hyped and gun violence is explained away.

That's because of money too. As the bodies from Columbine, Aurora and Newtown pile up, the gun manufacturer's lobby, the National Rifle Association, plays down the role of guns because it is bad for business.

NSA director General Keith Alexander says the reason there are so few terrorists attacks is due to the very NSA programs Snowden has exposed. He testified before Judge Leon's ruling that at least 50 terrorist plots have been disrupted since 9/11 because of NSA surveillance. Alexander gave details only about a handful. What isn't known is how many of these plots were actually FBI sting operations, initiated and carried by the feds using informants.

As Federal Judge Colleen McMahon said about one of these stings: "The essence of what occurred here is that a government, understandably zealous to protect its citizens from terrorism, came upon a man [the supposed terrorism ringleader] both bigoted and suggestible, one who was incapable of committing an act of terrorism on his own.

"It [the F.B.I.] created acts of terrorism out of his fantasies of bravado and bigotry, and then made those fantasies come true. The government did not have to infiltrate and foil some nefarious plot there was no nefarious plot to foil."

Having covered Susan Rice as the U.S. ambassador at the U.N. since 2009, I asked her through her spokesman the following question as she prepared to leave to become National Security Advisor last summer:

"A country like Pakistan suffers a terrorist attack nearly every day but terrorism inside the U.S. has fortunately been very rare before and after 9/11. Do you believe the U.S. exaggerates the threat of terrorism, which has justified controversial NSA programs, and if so, in your new job will you work

for a more realistic assessment of the terrorism threat?"

It is not surprising she wouldn't answer. It is hard to know how many of the elite who benefit financially and politically from the surveillance state and perpetual war believe the terrorism hype themselves.

But one thing is certain. They have to keep the fear going and get Snowden to make an example of him and stop future leaks. Their careers may depend on it.

Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist based at the U.N. since 1990. He has written for the Boston Globe, the London Daily Telegraph, the Johannesburg Star, the Montreal Gazette, the Wall Street Journal and other newspapers. He can be reached at joelauria@gmail.com .
