Is Government Inept or Sinister?

The image of a bumbling government, fumbling the Healthcare.gov rollout, clashes with the image of NSA running a terrifying Big Brother dystopia. But these sharp contrasts often reflect the viewer's opinions or political needs more than the shaded realities, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Two basic ways of berating something or somebody are to make charges of ineptitude or charges of ill intentions. With most subjects there is tension between those two modes of criticism. Ill intentions do not matter if there is insufficient ability to act on them. When a particular line of criticism becomes conventional wisdom this tension often is overlooked, as is true of many implications of conventional wisdom.

Conventional wisdom in criticism of U.S. intelligence agencies has focused most of the time on accusations of ineptitude. "Intelligence failure" customarily gets explained as a matter of organizational incompetence. This is a subtype of a larger leitmotif according to which government agencies overall are said to be less competent than enterprises in the private sector.

This broader conventional wisdom overlooks many significant developments that government pioneered before the private sector commercially exploited them, from space travel to the Internet. Nonetheless, the broader conventional wisdom seems to have become increasingly prevalent in recent years.

The controversy over collection activity by the National Security Agency, however, has lurched conventional wisdom about intelligence agencies into a different mode, one that had seldom prevailed except for a time in the 1970s. Little notice has been taken of the suddenness of the lurch, or of the irony involved in it, although it did come up in a recent report by NPR. The specific subject of the report was NSA's breaking through encryption used to protect private data and messaging, and an "arms race" between technology companies seeking better ways to encrypt material and NSA seeking to decrypt it.

The chief information officer of NSA states that the agency's whole budget is less than what big tech companies spend on research. But other views nonetheless give NSA a better chance of winning the arms race.

James Lewis of the Center for Strategic and International Studies says, "NSA has been in the business a long time. They've got 300 of the best mathematicians in the world. They've got the world's most powerful computer. Hmm, that's a hard hand to beat."

Lewis observes that previously "companies assumed that they were the ones who were the tech wizards and government was sort of bumbling," but with recent revelations about NSA's work "that whole world view has been stood on its head."

Breaking codes is, of course, central to the mission assigned to NSA. This is just one respect in which much of the controversy about the agency's activities arises *because it is very good at doing what it is supposed to do*. Think about that the next time there is a real or perceived intelligence failure and criticism lurches back to the more common mode of alleged ineptitude.

Think about it also as we await President Barack Obama's response to his advisory panel's recommendations about electronic surveillance. Ill intentions are not really the issue here, since nothing in the torrent of leaks has revealed any agency malevolence; it is only the fear of some future ill intentions (although that fear would be better directed at data collection in the private sector).

Whether real or feared, there is still a tension between this concern and our interest in an intelligence agency having the ability to do its job, the job here being not just the cracking of a code but the broader mission of providing accurate and timely intelligence on behalf of national security.

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