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Secrecy: the oxygen of the deep state, the enemy of democracy

Submitted by sosadmin
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“But this secrecy...has become a god in this country, and those people who have secrets travel in a kind of fraternity...and they will not speak to anyone else.” - Senator J. William Fulbright, Chairman, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, November 1971

If knowledge is power, ignorance is weakness. Who holds the most power in the United States? Is it the President, Congress, and the Supreme Court? Or is it the deep state? Could Senator Dianne Feinstein or President Obama walk into CIA headquarters, the NSA’s Fort Meade, or an operations base run by the Joint Special Operations Command and start going through computer systems searching for interesting items, if they wanted to?

Do elected officials and courts in the United States have a right to know what these secret organizations do with the authority they have granted our spies and killers? If not, who really runs the government? If the national security state can exist above and outside the rule of law, is this truly a democracy?

President Eisenhower famously warned about the power of the military industrial complex. But he also worried about the power of secretive, covert intelligence agencies. Describing the CIA’s efforts to combat the influence of the Soviet Union, Eisenhower said:

We were engaged in the defense of a way of life, and the great danger was that in defending this way of life we would find ourselves resorting to methods that endangered this way of life.

Eisenhower was right. The institutions that now make up the intelligence community in the United States threaten American democracy. Their obsessive secrecy, disregard for the public, and willingness to mislead or outright lie in order to get what they want demonstrate that they exist outside or above the rule of law.

The backlash against unofficial leaks and the heavy-handed prosecution of whistleblowers show that truth-telling is kryptonite to the National Security State's power. That's why, if we are interested in regaining democratic control over our government, we must both reject state secrecy in the name of "National Security", and support whistleblowers who risk their lives to expose what's really going on in the belly of the deep state.

The deep state v. democracy

The phrase 'deep state' originates in Turkey, but the deep state's emergence in the United States dates to the close of World War II, a watershed moment in American history that saw the birth of the military industrial complex, the National Security Council, and the Central Intelligence Agency. What is the deep state? In 2005, former Turkish president Suleymann Demirel described the secretive military and police powers that he viewed as having fundamentally overcome public democratic institutions in his country.

"It is a fundamental principle that there is one state," he said, but "in our country there are two. There is one deep state and one other state. The state that should be real is the spare one, the one that should be spare is the real one."

People familiar with the history and politics of the Levant and North Africa know well the various terms used to describe the agencies of the deep state in autocratic and dictatorial regimes from Iran to Morocco. In Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Syria, these forces are known as the mukhabarat, which means 'intelligence'. These are the secret police. In Mohamed Reza Shah's Iran, they went by the name SAVAK, for 'Organization of Intelligence and National Security'. In present day Iran, they are known as VEVAK, or 'Ministry of Intelligence and Security'. In Morocco the secret police organization is the Directorate of Territorial Surveillance or DST. Their methods include warrantless surveillance, torture, detainment without charge, bribery, assassination, blackmail, and espionage. Sound familiar?

There for a long time existed a prevailing assumption in the United States and Europe that these activities and organizations thrived only in "the East", and that only outwardly autocratic or dictatorial regimes -- not 'democratic' 'Western' governments -- deployed murderous, politically-driven, insular, and secretive 'intelligence' agencies. Decades after the congressional investigations into the so-called 'intelligence community' in the 1970s, it is impossible to maintain this myth. Nonetheless, some even today claim that organizations like the CIA operate in the service of elected officials -- hamstrung by robust democratic oversight -- and not the other way around.

The events of the past twelve years should go a long way towards undermining the assertion that ‘western’ intelligence agencies like the CIA are controlled by congress or the executive, but more distant history shows that intelligence agencies in the United States have always done things their way. From the CIA’s coup in Iran -- which President Eisenhower initially opposed and would not have happened if his guidance had been heeded -- to the FBI’s war on civil rights and anti-war activists, and the NSA’s illegal surveillance in OPERATION SHAMROCK, US history is chock full of scandals that suggest a ruthless deep state operates independently of democratic institutions, if not also in opposition to them.

Describing Turkey, David Phillips wrote for the Council on Foreign Relations: “The deep state – a shadowy network involving the military and intelligence apparatus as well as the state bureaucracy -- is the ultimate arbiter of power.” That description fits the United States, too.

The deep state has overpowered its public democratic institutions when a government’s “national security bureaucracy is sufficiently muscled and autonomous to work relatively independently of [its] political leaders.” In the wake of the Snowden leaks, who can deny that this is the case with the United States? The press reports that the President of the United States and the head of the Senate Intelligence Committee did not know that the NSA was wiretapping the Prime Minister of Germany, one of the US government’s closest allies. Most of congress is completely shut out of information about surveillance and covert programs that they nonetheless vote to fund and, at least in broad strokes, authorize.

And this behavior isn’t new. Historical volumes about the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover are littered with anecdotes describing his deft manipulation of political officials including presidents -- either by withholding information from them ‘for their own good’, or by operating programs behind their backs with no intention of ever revealing their existence.

As my colleague Jay Stanley eloquently described, so-called National Security Officials have a knack for assuming they know what is best for everyone, and acting accordingly. He attributes this to arrogance. But while narcissism probably plays a role here, the primary reason they don’t consult the public about their activities is because they know large numbers of us would recoil in horror if we knew what they were really doing with our money, and in our names. The programs are kept secret not simply because officials arrogantly assume they know what is best for us; they are kept secret primarily because officials know that an honest accounting of their powers might result in a public backlash that would limit them.

Working “independently” of democratically elected or appointed public officials enables the deep state to violate the law, behave immorally and unethically, and act against the interests of the majority of people in the country, as well as the world. It also, critically, allows intelligence agencies to continue to vacuum up precious public resources without having to show either a majority of elected officials or the public any evidence that its programs do anything useful.

The CIA’s war on democracy and the war on whistleblowers at home

Perhaps no agency in the United States represents more concretely the dangers inherent to the deep state’s triumph over democratic institutions than the CIA. In 1971, Senator Stuart

Symington, a member of the Joint Senate Committee for CIA Oversight, told the public that “There is no federal agency of our government whose activities receive less scrutiny and control than the CIA.”

Former secretary of state Dean Acheson has said of the CIA, “I had the gravest forebodings about this organization, and warned the President that as set up neither he, the National Security Council, nor anyone else would be in a position to know what it was doing or to control it.”

Despite the intelligence reforms of the 1970s, the CIA continues to operate above and beyond the rule of law.

For readers interested to learn in detail about how the secrecy governing CIA operations has enabled the agency to waste taxpayer dollars in fruitless, dangerous, and murderous missions, read Tim Weiner’s book “A Legacy of Ashes”. It dispels the myth that the agency is a James Bond-style, suave and effective spook organization. Instead, the CIA record is revealed as a series of embarrassments, disappointments, and shameful crimes that came back to bite the people of the United States and the world. Like the CIA’s more recent work, including the horrors of the rendition program, the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, and its monstrous ‘signature strike’ drone “crowd killings,” none of those operations would have been possible had it not been for the shroud of secrecy covering all things CIA.

Torture and disappearances happen in *secret* prisons. Memos justifying and documents describing the murder of untold numbers of civilians deemed ‘militants’ because of their age and place of birth are kept *secret* for a reason. The NSA did not tell the public it was harvesting our associational records, stealing our private communications from Google and Yahoo, or giving the FBI access to our communications sucked up without warrants. If we had known the NSA was doing these things, we might have stopped the agency from doing them.

Despite claims from the heads of the NSA, CIA, FBI and DHS, and from their apologists, state secrecy more often shields from public scrutiny illegal, unethical, wasteful, or embarrassing facts than it does protect legitimately classified information. The proceedings in the ACLU’s down-the-rabbit-hole drone FOIA lawsuit against the CIA provide just one among countless examples of how this crisis in democratic governance manifests today.

The deep state is not interested in democracy, and never has been. It is interested in power. In order to maintain and expand its power, it must maintain an iron curtain of secrecy governing its operations. That is why the deep state is terrified of whistleblowers, and lashes out at them, calling them traitors and prosecuting them under Draconian laws like the 1917 Espionage Act. There is nothing more threatening to these organizations than sunlight.

When its operations cannot be hidden -- for example with the CIA’s drone strikes in Pakistan and elsewhere -- the deep state ensures that evidence of its involvement remains secret, if only technically. While we may know because of outside evidence that the CIA engages in crowd killings and the bombings of funerals and rescue workers, we cannot take meaningful legal action in the United States against these crimes if we cannot see the legal memos that authorize these kinds of strikes, or the records describing their execution. Secrecy protects illegality.

The deep state and democratic institutions do not speak the same language. That's why when accidental transparency -- in the form of whistleblowers or leaks -- forces secret programs or policies into the light of day, the deep state has only one substantive response to jurists and to the public both: State Secrecy cannot be disturbed, because of National Security.

It's past time we saw through and denounced that poisonous lie. As Edward Snowden's leaks reveal, state secrecy does not protect us -- it protects the deep state. Secrecy is the lynchpin of intelligence abuses. It is the oxygen that feeds the deep state. Without it, its institutions and programs would wither and die.

Towards that end, let a million whistleblowers bloom.