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Obama's press conference: The smiling face of a police state

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At Friday's press conference, President Barack Obama resorted to outright lies in his defense of the massive and illegal surveillance programs exposed by former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden.

Obama made it clear that, as far as he was concerned, the problem was not that wholesale violations of the Constitution were being perpetrated by his government, but that these crimes had been made known and had alarmed the public. What was needed was a better job of public relations.

The press conference itself was thrown together to assuage popular anger and concern over the systematic violation of privacy rights. As Obama said, his aim was to "make the American people more comfortable" about government snooping on every aspect of their lives.

"America is not interested in spying on ordinary people," Obama said, as if documents had never been published exposing the government's seizure of records of all telephone calls placed in the United States, its dragnet of electronic communications around the world, its recording of license plates, and its photographing of letters.

This statement came one day after the *New York Times* reported that the NSA is “copying and then sifting through the contents of what is apparently most emails and other text-based communications that cross the border.” It followed last week’s exposure of the NSA’s XKeyscore program, which allows analysts to listen to phone calls and read emails at will without a warrant or authorization from higher-ups.

In a tone of seeming incomprehension, Obama said, “And a general impression has, I think, taken hold, not only among the American public but also around the world, that somehow we’re out there willy-nilly just sucking in information on everybody and doing what we please with it.”

But as everyone knows, that is precisely what the US government is doing.

In discussing the surveillance programs, Obama attempted to project a patient attitude toward public concerns. “It’s right to ask questions about surveillance,” he said. Only when the question of Snowden came up was there a flash of anger in his voice and a tightening in his face. “No, I don’t think Mr. Snowden was a patriot,” Obama said in response to a reporter’s question.

He went on to accuse the whistle-blower of “putting at risk our national security and some very vital ways that we are able to get intelligence that we need to secure the country.”

But Obama was caught in a flagrant contradiction. On the one hand, he implied that Snowden was a traitor. On the other, Obama acknowledged that he had been compelled to reassure the public because of Snowden’s revelations, without which the people would have remained in the dark.

The president spoke as though he was amazed that the actions of the government had deeply alarmed the population. He seemed surprised that anyone could doubt the hard work and good faith of the NSA. He lavished praise on the spy agencies, declaring that their operatives were “patriots” who “work every single day to keep us safe because they love this country and believe in our values.”

Having made clear that all of the spying programs will continue, he announced a handful of vague and meaningless measures that will in no way lessen the programs’ criminal character. “Some bolts needed to be tightened on some of the programs,” he said.

“Tightening the bolts” on the vast bureaucratic machinery of state surveillance and putting a smiling face on the agencies and individuals who are targeting the American people for repression—such is Obama’s response to the exposure of vast crimes against the US Constitution and the democratic rights of the people.

Less than three months ago, Obama gave a speech at the National Defense University in which he acknowledged that policies such as drone assassinations of American citizens and the

indefinite detention of prisoners at Guantanamo—for which he is responsible—called into question the viability of American democracy. Yet he now speaks as though the shredding of the Bill of Rights is merely a communications problem.

The White House press corps, pliant as always, did not challenge claims by Obama that everyone in the room knew to be lies. No reporter so much as hinted that the NSA programs were unconstitutional.

Nor did anyone raise questions about the global terror alert, which Obama cited at the start of his remarks as justification for the surveillance programs. The fact that in the midst of a supposedly imminent threat Obama is leaving the capital to vacation at Martha's Vineyard was never broached.

Even more chilling than Obama's lies is his obliviousness to democratic principles. There is not a hint of concern for what Eisenhower warned of a half-century ago—the immense danger to democratic rights posed by the rise of a military-industrial complex. And this is under conditions of a present-day military-intelligence-industrial complex far beyond anything Eisenhower could have imagined.

Obama personifies the contempt for democratic rights and the Constitution, and the police state mentality that pervade all branches of the US government.