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The new paranoia: A government afraid of itself

By Jesse Walker

August 15, 2013

In the popular stereotype, conspiracy theorists direct their paranoia at the government: The CIA shot JFK. NASA faked the moon landing. Sept. 11 was an inside job.

But the most significant sorts of political paranoia are the kinds that catch on with people inside the halls of power, not the folks on the outside looking in. The latest example is a crackdown on leaks that has the government crippled by a fear of its own employees. Washington is petrified of itself.

The federal effort, called the Insider Threat Program, was launched in October 2011, and it certainly hasn't diminished since Edward Snowden disclosed details of the National Security Agency's domestic spying. As McClatchy reporters Marisa Taylor and Jonathan S. Landay have described, federal employees and contractors are encouraged to keep an eye on allegedly suspicious indicators in their co-workers' lives, from financial troubles to divorce. A brochure produced by the Defense Security Service, titled "INSIDER THREATS: Combating the ENEMY within your organization," sums up the spirit of the program: "It is better to have reported overzealously than never to have reported at all."

The word “espionage” appears 10 times in that pamphlet, while “leak” isn’t used even once. But the most insidious part of the crackdown is that it blurs the boundary between spies and whistleblowers. This comes, after all, at a time when the government is increasingly willing to prosecute leakers under the Espionage Act. An agent of a foreign power would fall under the program’s purview, but so would someone releasing information to the media. Leaking, one Defense Department document declares, “is tantamount to aiding the enemies of the United States.”

It doesn’t help that the Insider Threat Program has been adopted in agencies that have little or nothing to do with national security, including the Social Security Administration, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Department of Education and the Peace Corps. A tutorial for Agriculture Department employees includes a long list of “examples of behaviors that may indicate an individual has vulnerabilities that are of security concern.” These include sleeping at your desk — that might be a sign of alcoholism — and “expression of bizarre thoughts, perceptions, or expectations.” The list was imported, word for word, from a Defense Department document.

Other conspiracy theories involve groups that seem different: Suspected plotters can be identified by where they live, their racial or ethnic identity, or their social status. The enemy within, by contrast, can live anywhere and look like anyone. The men and women allegedly atop the cabal might be based in another country, but their puppets are neighbors, co-workers, members of your family. Anyone could conceivably be — or become — part of the plot.

This isn’t the first time an effort intended to protect national security has spiraled into something bigger, messier and more dangerous for individual liberty.

The most famous crackdown on the enemy within was the post-World War II Red Scare, when fear of Soviet spies caused trouble not just for genuine foreign agents but for a host of people who merely had left-wing leanings. Less well known, but arguably even more intrusive, was a simultaneous crackdown that the historian David K. Johnson has called the Lavender Scare.