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The Police State of America

Freedom's just another word...'

by DAVE LINDORFF

I no longer recognize my country.

Back in 1997, after two years living in China, and five more living in Hong Kong, during which time, as a correspondent for *Business Week* magazine, I slipped in and out of China regularly as a journalist to report on developments there, I got a good dose of life in a totalitarian society. When I alit from the plane in Philadelphia where my family and I were about to start a new chapter of our lives, I remember feeling like a big weight had been lifted off my chest.

The sense of freedom was palpable.

Almost immediately, though I got an inkling that something was amiss. An art teacher in Upper Dublin, the suburban town where we had bought a house, had just been arrested, charged with theft of \$400 in school art supplies. Of course, my initial reaction was, "Great school district we're in, if the teachers are stealing from the school!"

The teacher, Lou Ann Merkel, who had been arrested and briefly jailed pending arraignment, was fired and was facing trial on a felony charge of stealing public property. But in a few weeks, as I followed the story in the local weekly paper, it became clear that there had really been no theft (she was taking old supplies which were being replaced with new ones, intending to bring them to a local community center used by low-income children who went there for day care and

after-school care. Moreover, when stopped by the principal and told that the old supplies had to be put in the dumpster, she grudgingly complied. She was arrested anyway later, at her home). I learned over subsequent weeks of news reports that Merkel actually was being hounded by an obsessive power-tripping school administration simply for being an “activist” and outspoken teacher. A school board hearing I attended was packed in December of that year with over a hundred angry parents and former students of Merkel’s demanding that the board drop its case against her. It did not, but a county judge had the good sense to do exactly that, ruling that “no crime occurred here.” (Merkel, who got her job back with back pay, later sued the school district and won a significant judgement against it.)

This was one small example of government tyranny run amok but since then I have seen it become the norm in a United States where people are now being arrested for almost everything — kids jailed without trial for shoplifting, hitchhikers jailed for arguing, correctly, with cops that it is not illegal for them to thumb for a ride, non-white youths in many cities stopped and frisked for “walking while black or hispanic” and then getting busted on trumped up charges (resisting arrest, assaulting an officer, disturbing the peace, etc.) when the cops find no guns or drugs on them, protesters beaten and gassed and jailed for simply trying to exercise their First Amendment rights.

But that is just the surface.

As a journalist working in China, I had to watch my back all the time. Spies from the Ministry of State Security (China’s KGB) or one of the local Public Security Bureaus that operate under its jurisdiction would secretly follow my movements, and would keep track of whoever I interviewed. In one case, after my departure, they badly beat a source to the point that he had to be hospitalized for reconstructive surgery to his crushed cheek bones (his entire groin region was also left black and blue after his brutal beating). The man’s offense? He had shown me around a rural region where peasants were improving their lives by sending some of their children off to the city to do construction jobs.

I thought this kind of monitoring and intimidation of sources was a nightmare back then in China.

Now it’s happening here in the US, only *worse*. Not only is the National Security Agency monitoring every phone call I make, every email I sent, every person I interview and every article I write—something Chinese police were not capable of at least in those days—but the agency can be watching what I write at this moment, as a type these letters on my keyboard.

How do I know they’re watching me? Well, of course I can’t know for certain, because they won’t tell me on the grounds of “national security,” which has rendered the Freedom of Information Act moribund. But courageous leakers from within the NSA, most notably Edward Snowden, have released documentary evidence proving that the super-secretive spy agency has been monitoring all communications between Americans and foreign contacts, most notably with countries like Russia or Iran or other nations which the US views as “enemies.”

In my case, as a journalist, I write often on international issues, as when I broke the story exposing an arrested killer in Lahore, Pakistan as a CIA operative, or wrote about how Israeli commandos executed a 19-year-old unarmed American peace activist in their raid on a Turkish-flagged peace flotilla headed for Gaza. I am also an occasional guest on news programs on RT-TV, the Russian state television news network, and on Iran's state-owned Press TV. For one year, ending about a year ago, I was contracted to write a weekly column for PressTV's English-language website, for which I was paid \$200 per column. Because of US sanctions against Iran's banking business, Press TV said they would pay me quarterly, rather than monthly, to minimize the paperwork hassles. This meant that for a year I was getting wire transfer of about \$2600 every quarter from an Iranian bank. You can be sure I was on the NSA's radar for that, if nothing else.

(Interestingly, I had more editorial freedom with that job than I've ever had writing for any news organization in the US. I picked my own topics for columns, Press TV agreed not to make any changes, or cuts, in my pieces, and I got paid in full whether they ran a story or not. Only once in the course of a year of columns did they not run a piece — an article I did on the debate over the death penalty in the US. The editor claimed that it was too "US-focused" and that it would "not be of interest" to Press TV readers. Even articles I wrote that included criticisms of Iranian policy ran unaltered.)

Even if everything I say on the phone or write on my computer, every site I visit online, every place I travel, every person I interview, is not being monitored by the NSA, the fact that we know the government is doing this, and is capable of doing this thanks to billions of dollars being spent in secret on massive super-computer arrays in Maryland and Utah, the damage is done. I have to *assume* that it is being done, and adjust my mind and my working methods to that reality. Recent arrests, convictions and lengthy sentences handed out to journalists' sources also mean I have to assume that my promises of anonymity to sources — a key to any good investigative journalism — are empty. The reality is that unless I resort to secret meetings in person with sources, or start using throw-away cell phones, the NSA can find out who I am communicating with.

A total police state may not exist (yet) in the US in the sense of the one I lived in for a while in China, where people get taken away without charge, not to be seen again for years, if ever, and where people get executed without even the semblance of a fair trial on trumped-up charges of corruption or assaulting an officer or threatening state security. But because of the extent of the spying secretly being done now in the US by the NSA, the FBI and other US "law-enforcement" and national "security" agencies, we have to live now as though it is happening.

Because it *could* be happening to any one of us, and because all that data they are collecting could be used later against us.

Not only that, but the data being collected can be manipulated, clipped and doctored, so as to make us look guilty of something when we are not.

Make no mistake. What happened to Lou Ann Merkel was an example of a police state at work. A courageous woman who dared to speak out against subtle and sometimes not so subtle racism

in the school where she worked, and someone who dares to speak her mind on any topic, was threatened with jail by a school superintendent who felt he had absolute power and who in fact had the power to have her arrested on his say so on trumped-up charges.

Today we are all Lou Ann Merkel. Step out of line or stand on principle and we lose jobs, face arrest, and become the targets of the NSA's spy machine.

(Incidentally, by way of full disclosure, Lou Ann is a friend and the wife of my *ThisCantBeHappening!* colleague John Grant. I met them both at that Upper Dublin School Board hearing mentioned above.)

There is one difference between China, the police state I lived in and reported on back in the 1990s, and the US police state of today. In China, everyone knows they are living in a totalitarian society. There is no confusion about that. Chinese people know that their news is controlled, that they are being watched and monitored on phone and online, and that if they step out of line there will be dire consequences for them and their families. Many do anyway, or resist in smaller ways.

In the US, most Americans remain blissfully unaware of how their freedoms have been stolen or surrendered. While they may say they don't trust the government and don't believe the news, they actually do to a remarkable extent. That's the only explanation for society allowing — even encouraging — the government to continue to execute people based on a findings of a court system that is clearly corrupt to the core. It's the only reason so many people say they support government spying to keep us "safe from terrorism." It's the only reason local communities, like mine here in Upper Dublin, keep voting more money for small armies of police officers equipped with M-16s and SWAT gear in places that violent crime is almost unheard of.

The United States is not China, or the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany). Not yet. But I'm afraid we are almost there, and in some ways we are in a worse place than the peoples of those societies, because so many of us here in the so-called "Land of the Free and the Brave" are living with eyes willfully closed to what is happening to us and to our country.

Americans can still wake up. We seem to have done that in the latest attempt by the war-mongers in Washington to launch yet another bloody war in the Middle East. But there is still far too much sleep-walking going on.

Benjamin Franklin once famously said: *"Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."*

We Americans have been surrendering our liberty since the dawn of the national security state in 1947. The process accelerated with President Nixon's "war" on crime and especially his "war" on drugs, which militarized police. Things grew worse under subsequent presidents, including President Reagan, who accelerated the "Drug War," and President Clinton, who gutted habeas corpus. Presidents George W. Bush and current President Obama have stolen more freedom from Americans than any leaders in the country's history, with the acquiescence of most citizens.

Clearly we are not safer now. And as Franklin warned so presciently, when it comes to our liberties, we are now in danger of losing it all.

As it is, I no longer recognize the country I grew up in and in which I began my journalism career.