How the U.S. Security State Expanded, Even After Snowden Revelations

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Glenn Greenwald (GG): Last question is from @BabyBrazil. Maybe not the last question. We'll see how this goes. "Hi, Glenn. Thanks for taking questions as usual. I've been reading Ed Snowden's book, *Permanent Record* – which, if you haven't read it, I mean, I'm not saying this because Snowden was my source and is my friend, but it's a great book. It's kind of his memoir about what led him to become, I think, clearly the century's most important and consequential whistleblower, engaging in incredibly brave, exceptionally unusually brave behaviour. What motivated him, what the thought process was, what he went through, what his views are. The question is: "I'm struck by his outrage when he discovered the details of Stellar Wind. What are your thoughts since publishing his revelations about how the American consciousness has changed and adapted to a new reality where facial recognition software is everywhere? The core function of Stellar Wind continues in law, and companies like NSO Group and Palantir make surveillance of individuals much easier for governments around the world. Why are we still not outraged?"

You know, I've been talking about and reading about facial recognition software, just to illustrate one of the points. For years, someone I know who's a journalist of the New York Times, she's married to Trevor Tim, who's executive director of the Freedom of the Press Foundation that I co-founded. So I know her reasonably well. She wrote a book on facial recognition software that was actually quite good about the rapid remarkable advances that this technology has already achieved that most people haven't really begun to appreciate, let alone the consequences of them. And I don't know when it was, probably like nine months ago – you know, I've been traveling back and forth from the United States to the United States for 20 years or more with great frequency. And every time it's always the same. You land in JFK or Miami or wherever, Houston, and you go through immigration, you take out your passport, you give your passport to the customs and an immigration official, he looks at your passport, compares the picture, maybe scans your passport so information comes up about you that's digitally stored. And that's it.

And for the last, I don't know how long, 10 years, every single person who enters the US, including US citizens, gets photographed. And you get photographed whenever you travel internationally. So just constant photographs of your face going into government databases

linked to every conceivable part of your government identity. And you know this, I mean, you know that's why they're taking your picture. And you can imagine very easily the kind of power this technology would provide. I mean you walk on the street, the prevalence of drone technology and surveillance – let alone that you don't even need street cameras anymore – will enable the government to pretty much identify every single person where they are at all times.

But I remember, nonetheless, you have these views in the abstract and they alarm you in the abstract, but they don't really alarm you on a visceral level because you're not really experiencing them yet. I guess nine months ago, the first time I landed in the US, I went to give my passport to the customs agent, and he made it pretty clear he just didn't need it. And he just told me to look in the camera and then popped up all my information. He didn't touch my passport and had all the information he needed. And there was actually some mark, I got secondary screening. And I realized then that the ability to just immediately identify you with the tiniest camera, and not just identify who you are, but who knows how much other information is immediately connected to your face is extremely potent.

There was an article today in the Wall Street Journal about how Israel used its genocide destruction of Gaza to test all these great advanced new weapons, including ones from Palantir. And I'm certain that one of the things they were doing – and I say I'm certain because when I worked with Jeremy Scahill on our very first story after we founded The Intercept, he came to Brazil to work with me because he had a source who had given him information. I was working with the Snowden Archive, and we combined them to be able to report on how one of the ways the US government was selecting targets to kill in Afghanistan and Pakistan was through a kind of incipient artificial intelligence where it would analyze the metadata of every person a certain person was talking to. So if you were somebody who talked to many people with frequency who were deemed terrorists in this database, you'd get a very high point score. And then if you were exceeding a certain point score, you became a legitimate target to be killed. And you can imagine how quickly and easily an error could happen. If you're a journalist, you might be talking to the Taliban all the time in reporting. If you're a government official, you might be talking to all kinds of people the US government dislikes, and you could compile a very high score that puts you on a kill list, and then a drone just comes by and blows up your house.

Obviously, that's what the Israelis were doing, a lot of, as well as new weapons that they were using to incinerate things. And the article was actually about how in Europe, a lot of European countries who made a big flamboyant show of condemning the Israelis, and even making a point of saying "we're not going to allow Israel to do this" or "we're not going to have contact with Israel for this" – Israel now, because of the two year experience that they had of "testing" weapons on the people of Gaza, now has a major export industry of advanced technology and defense. And the Europeans are very interested in buying it for themselves because they think they're going to have a war with Russia and they no longer think the US is going to protect them. And so for all the talk about, "oh Israel, we condemn Israel" – they're very much eager to acquire these weapons from Israel that have been proven on the

battlefield to be "effective". "Proven" meaning Israel was just experimenting in Gaza on the Palestinian people to prove what kind of weapons work or didn't work on the battlefield.

And a lot of it is artificial intelligence. That's why Palantir is so important. A lot of it is kind of trying to assign scores, but in a more sophisticated way, to who deserves to live and die based on just algorithms and predictability and machine learning. And then Palantir not only provides the evaluative software and the algorithmic analysis, but also the weapons that are then connected to it. So they're kind of like robotic, artificial intelligence driven drones that just can go around and suck up information then based on the information it sucks up, "make a decision". And I'm saying "decision" in quotes, because it's really based on technology of mass surveillance and artificial intelligence to decide who lives and who dies.

And so you can say, well, what about all the uproar? And there was a lot of uproar over the Snowden reporting. I mean, I was in the middle of it. I know. I mean it was a very real consciousness transforming moment. It went on for two years. It was the top story in countless countries. And it led to legislative changes and diplomatic relations being severed or altered to all kinds of laws in countries designed to build their own infrastructure to protect their technology. And mostly what it did is it changed the behavior of big tech. That's when they instituted end-to-end encryption. They had to demonstrate to the users that users could trust Facebook and Google because they were petrified that Germany or South Korea or Japanese companies or Chinese companies could say, "hey, Facebook and Google are giving your data to the US government, use ours, and we won't". And they would lose an entire generation of users. It was a big deal. They really had to respond to the Snowden reporting. That's when Telegram emerged. People for the first time were starting to understand how the internet – kind of like what I was talking about before – can be this massively transformative technology in positive ways, but it could also be a tool of unprecedented repression and control. And there was a lot of global concern about privacy and mass surveillance digital in the digital age.

But one of the things that the US security state is very good at, that governments are very good at doing, is keeping people in fear. And if people are in fear, they're gonna start thinking privacy is a luxury and security are the most important things and no longer care. Like, hey, let the government know everything about what I'm doing, I'm not a pedophile, I'm not a terrorist, like, who cares? And when we did the Snowden reporting, it was like 12 years after 9/11 when we started, Al Qaeda was kind of stale, didn't really get people that scared anymore. And so suddenly you had ISIS. And they were starting to try and even create like these offshoots of Al Qaeda that were like way worse than Al Qaeda – the K group or Al Qaeda offshoots, I forget the names, but they claimed that there were these offshoots that were way more barbarian and savage and dangerous than the OG Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda 1.0. And then you went into Russia Gate and the fear of Russia.

And now you have the fear of Muslims, the "Muslim takeover". Somalians. As long as you keep giving people some enemy that they fear, like, "no, you don't have to fear the government. You don't have to fear all oligarchy. You don't have to fear the World Bank or

IMF or Wall Street. Don't worry about them. You may not like them, but no, it's the Somalians in Minnesota who are the reason your lives are so difficult. It's ISIS, it's Russia, it's Iran. And we need to fight them. We need to be ready to fight them. It's Maduro. If you can't afford to start a family, if you can't buy a house, if you're drowning in debt, it's because of Maduro. Let us go take out Maduro and your life will be better". And they're very good at this. The propaganda is very, very effective. It's tested over. It's a science. It studies how our brains work and what the fear responses are, and it manipulates and exploits those. And as long as it can keep manipulating and exploiting that fear level, the fear level goes up, the authoritarianism goes up, and the demand for privacy or protections or civil liberties erodes.

And if you look at the discourse in independent media online, you will be amazed at how neurotic people are, how paralyzed with fear they are. Just like that contrast that I showed you before of the video that Randy Fine posted of just Muslims doing nothing but praying on the streets. I just watch people look at this video. It was 80 Muslim Americans in Brooklyn peacefully in the early morning getting on prayer mats and bowing to God for two minutes or however long it takes, practicing their religion, nothing else. And Randy Fine says: "These are the barbarians at the gate. We have to stop them. Oh my God". And kept trying to engage people and say, like, what is scary about this video? What are you seeing here? And then when I posted that video of the Jews doing the same, the Orthodox Jewish people doing the same, they're like "the Jews don't want to kill me, the Muslims want to kill me. If you go to a Muslim community, they're gonna kill you".

And you look at these people who think they're so tough and strong, like Fox News and Ben Shapiro or whoever convinced them that Muslims are their problem, not the distribution of wealth, not the centralized control of money and power, not the military defense contractors or the banks or Silicon Valley or big tech. No. Forget about that. It's these Somalians in Minnesota. Those are the people who are endangering you. And you're like, how does that work? And you know, we're tribalistic. The more you point out the differences – that's why people got mad at me when I posted those Orthodox Jews, because most Americans look at those people and they say, "Yeah, those people don't look like us, they look different too". You know, you other-ize people, you just point out that somehow they don't think like you, they're not rational, and then suddenly people are focused on that and they're frightened and scared.

So if you come and say, like, hey, you don't want the FBI to be able to spy on domestic activity or have mass surveillance? And the FBI or the NSA says, "no, no, this we're we're doing this to stop the Muslims", which is what they said during the whole Snowden reporting. Huge numbers of people can be like: "You know what? I'm scared. I'm scared. I want the government to have this power. Just let them have this power. I'm not comfortable with it. I don't like the fact that they know everything I'm doing, but at the end of the day, like, what are they going to do to me? Let them just have a full dossier of everything I do all my life, no big deal. The Muslims are coming, and we have to stop them". Whatever – the Iranians or the Russians. That's why Democrats and Liberals stop caring about and complaining about the US security state. Because they got convinced that not the Somalis but the Russians are the

reason their lives are difficult and in danger. And so they wanted the CIA. That's why they became national security state supporters, why they love Liz Cheney and Bill Kristol. And they recruited all these women from the CIA and the NSA and the Pentagon, and they became a national security party because they got scared by Russia, not by Muslims or Iran, but by Russia. It's the same exact thing. It doesn't matter. It's like an ad lib. You just fill in the blank with whatever works on whatever groups of people to keep up high fear levels.

And as long as they have high fear levels, they're not going to care about things like privacy or restricting the power of the US surveillance state or Palantir or whatever. These seem like more abstract concerns than like Putin who's going to come and subvert an election, or Muslims who are going to come and rape your daughters. There's no rationality to it. Like, wait, how many Muslims are actually doing that? How much crime in the United States is attributable to the Somalis in Minnesota? Oh, they just caught 60 of them, a few dozen, stealing? How much stealing is being done by other groups? It's kind of like the same way you put fear in people about gay couples, like, "oh, they're gonna rape their kids or they're gonna rape your kids". If you go to Google or right now tweet "pastor arrested" or "Christian arrested" or "married couple arrested for molesting kids in their foster care or who they adopt" – how many stories are you going to find? Hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands.

But you can keep people focused on this one particular threat, and they're petrified. And a lot of people on the right like to think of themselves as tough, swaggering – like Valentina Gomez. She's like, "let me tell you something, Piers. I'm not scared of the dirty Muslims". And it sounds like it's kind of a caricature or camp version of some woman being super, but it's all based on fear. It's like, "oh my God, the Muslims are coming to rape us and they're coming to kill us". And it's just putting people in a state of permanent neuroses. And that is a big part of how people give up power. It's why it's been so potent to convince Jews that they're endangered in the United States, that there's an anti-Semitism crisis, that Jews go out to school and they get beaten up, or they walk on the street and they get attacked. This is all part of the fear mongering of what keeps people uncomfortable with government centralized power like surveillance and the like, but willing to accept it if it means that they can stay safe.

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