

CRYPTOME

Global Subversion Begets a Question for Ed Snowden Are Covert Ops Compatible With Democracy?

By **Bill Blunden**, October 12, 2014

It's part of the public record that the NSA has engaged in an industry-wide campaign to [weaken cryptographic protocols](#) and [insert back doors](#) into hi-tech products sold by U.S. companies. We also know that NSA officials have privately [congratulated each other](#) in successfully undermining privacy and security across the Internet. Hence it's only logical to assume that the NSA's numerous subversion programs extend into [foreign "commercial entities"](#). Thanks to [documents](#) recently disclosed by the Intercept we have unambiguous confirmation.

Hi-tech subversion underscores the fact that the [whole tired debate](#) regarding cryptographic keys held in escrow for so-called lawful interception (what the *Washington Post* called "[secret golden keys](#)") only serves to distract the public from programs aimed at wielding covert back doors. In other words, by reviving the [zombie idea](#) of an explicit back door the editorial board at the *Washington Post* is conveniently ignoring all of the clandestine techniques that already exist to [sidestep encryption](#). In a nutshell: [zero-day bugs](#) and [malware](#) often trump strong crypto.

On an aside it's interesting to observe the citadel of free thinkers at the Electronic Frontier Foundation continue to [promote cryptographic tools](#) as a privacy tonic with a faith that's almost religious while conspicuously neglecting other important aspects of operational security. The EFF cheerfully provides a litany of alleged success stories. Never mind [all](#) of the [instances](#) in which the users of said cryptographic tools were compromised, even users who [specialized in computer security](#).

Infiltrating the Media

The NSA's campaign to undermine software and hardware is mirrored by parallel efforts in other domains. Specifically, the [Church Committee](#) and [Pike Committee](#) investigations of the 1970s unearthed secret programs like [Operation Mockingbird](#) which were conducted to infiltrate the media and develop an apparatus, a [Mighty Wurlitzer](#) of sorts, that allowed government spies to quietly influence public perception. The findings of congressional investigators have been substantiated by writers like [Deborah Davis](#) and [Carl Bernstein](#).

Though much of the documented evidence is decades old the CIA continues to maintain its long-standing relationship with the press. For example in March of 2010 WikiLeaks published a [classified CIA analysis](#) which described a propaganda recipe for the "targeted manipulation of public opinion" in Germany and France to bolster support for NATO military action in Afghanistan. Also, here in the United States *New York Times* editor Bill Keller [admitted](#) to delaying the story on Bush-era warrantless wiretapping in direct service to the powers that be.

So don't think for a minute that the CIA didn't [have a hand](#) in the media's assault on journalist Gary Webb after Webb exposed the CIA's [connections](#) to the international drug trade. Gary caught U.S. intelligence with its pants down and spymasters had their operatives in the press destroy him.

More recently, the former editor of *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* revealed that he worked for the CIA. In a [televised interview](#) Udo Ulfkotte described Germany as an American client state, noting the role of the CIA in the origins of [German intelligence](#). He warned that powerful interests in the United States were pushing for war with Russia and that American spies have widespread links to foreign news outlets:

"Is this only the case with German journalists? No, I think it is especially the case with British journalists, because they have a much closer relationship. It is especially the case with Israeli journalists. Of course with French journalists. ... It is the case for Australians, [with] journalists from New Zealand, from Taiwan, well, there is many countries, ... like Jordan for example. ..."

A Question for Ed Snowden

While media subversion enables political manipulation through indirect means, U.S. intelligence has been known to employ [more direct means](#) to impose its agenda in places like Angola, Chile, Guatemala, Iran, Nicaragua, and [Ukraine](#). In fact, stepping back to view the big picture, one might be tempted to posit that U.S. intelligence has established clandestine footholds globally in any institution seen as vital to the interests of the corporate factions that drive the [American Deep State](#).

All of this subversion raises a question: are covert programs compatible with democracy? Can the public allow secrecy, propaganda, and infiltration to blossom while simultaneously expecting to be immune from their effects? Former CIA officers who went public, intrepid whistleblowers like Philip Agee and John Stockwell, answered this question with a resounding "no." As would millions of people in third-world countries who suffered through the bloody proxy battles of the Cold War. For instance, Philip Agee stated in his book [CIA Diary](#):

"When the Watergate trials end and the whole episode begins to fade, there will be a movement for national renewal, for reform of electoral practices, and perhaps even for reform of the FBI and the CIA. But the return to our cozy self-righteous traditions should lure no one into believing that the problem has been removed. Reforms attack symptoms rather than the disease"

Hence it's unsettling to hear Edward Snowden, despite his commendable admonishments for an open debate on mass surveillance, [maintain](#) the underlying legitimacy of government subterfuge:

"We can have secret programs. You know, the American people don't have to know the name of every individual that's under investigation. We don't need to know the technical details of absolutely every program in the intelligence community. But we do have to know the bare and broad outlines of the powers our government is claiming ... and how they affect us and how they affect our relationships overseas."

You're witnessing the power of framing the narrative. Society has been encouraged to discuss the legitimacy of what spies do and how they do it. But the problem with this well-intentioned dialogue is that "we the people" are led away from the more fundamental question of *whether society needs spies and their covert ops to begin with*.

Author's Note: In the past I've posed [a question](#) to Glenn Greenwald and was met with silence. Exceptional behavior for someone who is famous for responding vocally. Now we'll see how Mr. Snowden replies.

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