

Comment by Michael C H Jones
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The three best known Leakers of recent years are certainly Snowden, Assange and Manning. Famous or notorious is a matter of opinion. But their actions have certainly highlighted the related and interconnected issues of intelligence and governance in the modern democratic state. The principles are the same whether in the USA with the activities of NSA or in Australia with ASIS and ASIO re East Timor. What information should be secret, and which bodies are permitted to collect and declare that information secret, and in a Democracy who does the "monitoring" of those organisations, NSA, ASIS or whatever. Clearly the US Congress and Australian Parliament have failed - there are just so many examples.

We all come to these issues with baggage, or past experience and biases.

I well remember my years in the mid/late 1960s leading the anti-conscription and Vietnam War student protest movement at Sydney University whilst "assisting" on 11 campuses around Australia. What a hopeless lot ASIO were, with Special Branch of the NSW Police not much better, as highlighted in the current 4-programme series on SBS TV re "Persons of Interest". Wrecking peoples lives through falsehood with no appreciable return to the security of the country was their main achievement. I had a good laugh the day that Federal Attorney-General Lionel Murphy raided them and taped up all their filing cabinets. He then thankfully erased all "political" convictions from the records including my 21 arrests and 4 prison sentences and thus allowed me to travel over the past 40 years throughout the world including the USA, PRC and EU without challenge.

ASIO was simply a disgraceful organisation, good at collecting intelligence on dieing organisations such as the three Australian Communist Parties re Russian, Chinese, and Italian/Australian as well as the three minuscule Trotskyist groups, and reading USA newspapers on social movements that had little if any relevance to Australia. Paranoia personified. At least the Australian Government under Prime Minister Bob Menzies was honest, they just wanted to bog down the LBJ led US Government in the Vietnam War as early and as long as possible. With friends like that the Americans were bound to have their backside kicked as I predicted on the 22nd January 1965 re the US Public Broadcasting Corporation programme "Young World 1965 - Can there be Stability in South East Asia?" Allegedly 60 million Americans tuned in and I got banned by the Australian Government - probably ASIO was also watching ! But I did get an Australian Ambassador escorted free trip to the UN and Secretary-General U Thant's office with the seven Australian woods paneling on his wall ! The interface between Australian security and Australian governance was laughable and it is debatable whether anything has changed? Maybe it is even worse with all the new youngster recruits in both areas?

Which brings me to this New York Review of Books article and the question as to whether US intelligence services are any more efficient? Are the "successes" in Iraq and Afghanistan any better than those in Vietnam or countless US "firefights" around the world since the Korean War. If you are in the military, and you have done all that training, you simply must have a war somewhere to test the theories. And who better to provide the justifications than the intelligence services? Whether the Gulf of Tonkin Incident off the coast of North Vietnam or the "Weapons of Mass Destruction" in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, top secret information provided to emotionally unstable Presidents like George Bush Jnr cause the deaths and injury of

literally hundreds of thousands of innocent people not to mention the combatants for no worthwhile gain to America or the world. And who is ultimately held accountable? Like the Global Financial Crisis and feral capitalism, there is little transparency and the perpetrators retire with honour and large financial rewards. No wonder the man in the street has no trust in our so-called leaders - old style representative democracy has become a farce.

To me the most important paragraph, with it's monumental implications, is:

"The most significant abuse of authority that Snowden has revealed is not the illegality of any particular NSA action, but the fact that such an extensive spying program was authorized entirely in secret, without public input, assent, or even knowledge. While there must be room in a democracy for limited covert actions, surveillance of this scope-affecting every American and large swaths of the world's citizenry-should not be instituted without public acceptance and accountability. And in an increasingly globally interconnected world, the legitimacy of the NSA's actions cannot be determined solely by the American people. If the NSA is indeed collecting comprehensive data on the lives of millions of innocent foreign nationals, they, too, should have a voice in how they are being treated."

Forget about traditional time immemorial US navel gazing, the type of thinking that denies the applicability of international laws to American citizens but extends US legislation to the world, if Congress and its authorities impact the globe in most aspects then the people of the world have a right to a say in US governance. After-all isn't this the foundation of their political culture from the days of the Boston Tea Party? And from a secondary, and less principled perspective, and as I have written on many occasions, what an example the USA is setting for the PRC. As China elbows its way into the most powerful global institutions what norms will be its guidance - god forbid that China keeps records on every citizen on the globe ! Seven men on the CPC Politburo evaluating the futures of every US citizen that steps outside the country? How about that for paranoia?

In a political Free Society of any country, based on economic Free Trade around the world, Civil Society's 'freedom of speech' is only genuine if based on 'freedom of information' - there is no equal opportunity nor rational debate if cabals monopolise information by classifying it secret. Libertarian values and attitudes are the only solutions.

Alternatively you can have the Chinese system of governance. Welcome to the real world America and Australia. But vested monetary interests will never agree - just read Murdoch's global publications.