

[freedom is slavery]

# Surveillance State

The government is watching—because it can.

By Fred Reed

SOME BELIEVE THAT technology is a tool we use to suit our purposes. Actually, it uses us. More accurately, instead of facilitating our behavior, technology determines it: we use a given technology in the only way it can be used. Invent the automobile, and roads inevitably follow—and suburbs and shopping malls and finally a different ordering of society.

In the case of information technology, technological inevitability probably makes inescapable, if not a police state, at least a surveillance state.

People and governments do what is easy and convenient. Those who would never steal a book will copy CDs without hesitation, which is to say that technology has determined morality. Similarly, the lack of technology can determine morality. In particular, the freedom Americans have enjoyed has been less the result of American character than of governmental incapacity.

In the past, the government didn't watch us carefully because it couldn't. In 1950, the FBI could open your mail, or tap your telephone, but only with effort and risk of being caught. Consequently, it did so only in cases of importance.

The staggering capacities of today's computers and networks change things utterly. These are so powerful, offer such convenience, and fill so many benign purposes that their penetration of society, already great, will increase.

We can't stop it. Perhaps more correctly, we won't stop it. An unintended consequence is to establish detailed surveillance of our entire lives.

Three things in particular conduce to this end: first, the proliferation of databases. We have become so accustomed to databases that we cease to notice them. Let us refresh our attention. Countless commercial enterprises can find your records in seconds—telephone companies, banks, credit card operations, hospitals. So can the police, the IRS, the Department of Motor Vehicles, the Veterans Administration. This is convenient. It saves your time and cuts their costs. There are thousands of such databases, many of which you don't know

put everything about you at the fingertips of corporals on the Potomac. It is absolutely possible, and they absolutely want to do it. Congress may not permit it. If so, then the linking will proceed more slowly, step by step, for reasons of convenience and efficiency.

Third, the exponential increase in means and effectiveness of surveillance. Five years ago, if I had spoken of chips implantable beneath your skin to transmit your social security number silently to listening devices in your surroundings, you would have suggested Thorazine and a strait jacket. They exist—for benign purposes. Verichip Corporation sells them for people with serious medical problems. With a wand the paramedic on

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about. Their intentions are seldom nefarious. The capacity of such collections, and the ability to search them quickly, is without practical limit. Google indexes billions of web pages. A search takes a second.

Second, the ease of networking. Tying all these databases together, while initially a daunting exercise in programming, is not technically difficult. This is what the Pentagon looks to do in its proposed Total Information Awareness effort—to

the scene reads the patient's identifying number, which indexes instantly into a remote database containing his medical records. You can have one implanted in your dog. Benign. Convenient.

These RFID chips (radio-frequency identification) are roughly the size of a grain of rice and in quantity might cost five cents apiece. They need no batteries. Harmless uses can be imagined by the dozen. For example, instead of standing in line at the department store,

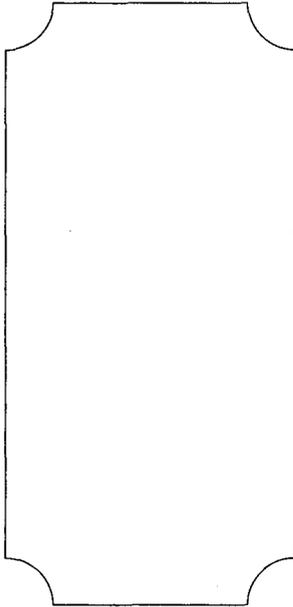
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a scanner could read the RFID tag of the items you wanted to buy, as well as the RFID tag in your credit card. The purchase would be automatically charged to your account. No muss, no fuss, no waiting. Sounds nice.

Companies like Gillette, Wal-Mart, and Procter and Gamble are looking at buying hundreds of millions of RFID tags to be attached to merchandise for inventory control. Europeans are considering putting them in banknotes. Inevitably there will be pressure to put them in cars to facilitate warranty work, in ID cards, in everything. By their nature they are read automatically by any nearby reader.

And so we could, and very well may, become trackable throughout our lives, barely being aware of it, with the information going to places yet to be determined.

RFID is merely part of a larger technological trend. We all know of the cameras at intersections that photograph the license plates of speeders. Software can be made to read the numbers without human intervention. The police, who do not at all want a police state, will argue for reading all numbers to find stolen cars, a legitimate aim. They will say that there is no expectation of privacy in a license plate, that if a cop can stand on the corner and read your plates, doing it automatically is no different.

But it is. Massive, around-the-clock, automated, centralized surveillance is qualitatively different from a cop glancing at a license plate. Will it happen? We are told not, as we were told that social security numbers would be used only for Social Security. But they were so very convenient for other purposes.

As e-mail becomes the normal means of communication, the federal capacity to watch increases astronomically. Screening your e-mail for addresses or content, diverting a copy without your knowledge to police headquarters, is child's play. This is what the FBI's Carni-

vore software does. When you cross our borders, your passport is swiped through a reader. If foreign governments choose to co-operate, as they eventually will, your movements abroad will be tracked.

Does this really matter? I think it does, for several reasons. First, it is intimidating: Simply knowing that your e-mail is being read and saved, that the night you spent at that gay bar or topless joint is on record, that your reading habits at Amazon or the library can be dredged up is chilling—even for the innocent. For people who might be on the wrong side of the government, for example journalists, it is worse. Nobody is without things that could be used against him.

Second, when justified by the pretext of combating terrorism, surveillance encourages mindless abuse. An examination of my Internet habits would show that I often go to sites dealing with bioterrorism, terrorist groups, explosives, synthesis of nerve agents, that I read books about the Taliban. I travel to strange places and correspond with people who have practical knowledge of such subjects. I have a concealed carry permit for Virginia, own firearms, and often use them. Does the machine kick out my name, whereupon the goons show up?

Third, ever-increasing capacity to watch provides the machinery of a Stalinism beyond Uncle Joe's most libidinous dreams. For a while, requirements for warrants (already weakened by the Patriot Act) and such may prevent the more horrendous forms of abuse. But there is nothing magical in the American character to reject a creeping totalitarianism. If you doubt this, go to an airport.

Watching is getting easier, fast. And what is easy is usually done. ■

*Fred Reed's writing has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Harper's, and National Review, among other places.*

# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[*Road to Perdition*]

### *An Average Hitman*

By Steve Sailer

"ROAD TO PERDITION" is out this week on DVD and VHS. It made \$104 million at the domestic box office and received six Oscar nominations, one for supporting actor Paul Newman and the rest in craft categories. The nomination of Thomas Newman (no relation to Paul) for Best Original Score is the 79th nomination earned by the Newman clan of composers, the Bachs of Hollywood. Despite its technical excellence, "Road to Perdition" missed out on any Oscar nods in the Big Three categories of Picture, Director, or Actor.

Over the last decade, Tom Hanks's batting average at choosing strong projects has been as high as any actor's ever. He stars in movies that are often innovative, well made, and always popular. His talismanic prestige drew tremendous talent to this solemn, slow-moving story of a soulful hitman who works for the Downstate Illinois Irish mob in 1931.

The sterling supporting cast includes Paul Newman as his conflicted boss who must choose between betraying his beloved protégé (Hanks) or his own rotten son (Daniel Craig). Stanley Tucci is superbly suave as Al Capone's lieutenant Frank Nitti, to whom both gangsters turn for help. The normally fascinating Jennifer Jason Leigh has a negligible part. And Jude Law overplays "The Reporter," an evil assassin dispatched to murder Hanks's noble assassin.

Visually gifted director Sam Mendes is back following his Oscar-winning debut "American Beauty." The late cameraman Conrad L. Hall's sumptuous cinematography garnered him his 10th Oscar nomination. Their painterly tableaux are memorable, yet static, as if they were filming each panel in a comic book.

The wintry darkness of the first hour will remind you of how discouraging the Depression was. Fortunately, the sun comes out as Hanks and his son flee for weeks toward Perdition, teaching each other the usual Important Life Lessons as they bond along the way. This metaphorical town's setting amidst the glorious Sleeping Bear sand dunes on Michigan's west coast makes for a striking climax.

Yet nothing demonstrates the geekification of American culture more than that all these master craftsmen assembled to make what turns out to be another comic book flick. To be precise, "Perdition" is based on long-time "Dick Tracy" writer Max Allan Collins's "graphic novel," a term that means "a long, pretentious, and expensive comic book."

"Perdition" has the same old illogical plotting, countless killings, absence of real women, passionate but puerile psychology, and a lack of sociological insight that you expect from a comic book aimed at youths.

You would appreciate the film's numerous pleasures more if you know ahead of time that "Road to Perdition" is fundamentally absurd.

For instance, Hanks wants to find and kill the man who shot up his family, but Capone's gang is hiding him. So our hero devises the brilliant plan of persuading the Chicago Outfit to see his side of the issue by repeatedly stealing Al Capone's money. Warning: Kids, the Chicago mob might not be in its prime anymore, but, still, do not try this in Illinois.

Also, Law's character, the reporter, is a psycho supervillain straight out of "Batman." He shoots people with his gun, then with his camera, and sells the gory crime scene pictures to the tabloids.

Hanks's normal on-screen persona as an average American Joe, who succeeds by drawing on reserves of character he did not know he had, is intimately connected to his inspiring real-life growth from just another funnyman to perhaps Hollywood's finest citizen, a champion of the bourgeois virtues. For example, he sacrificed tens of millions of dollars in acting salaries to oversee his two patriotic mini-series "From the Earth to the Moon" and "Band of Brothers."

Hanks is a classic baby boomer turned father, one who feels guilty over letting his career come before the two kids he had with his first wife. So he is working extra hard to raise his two younger children right. You can see the emotional appeal of the role to Hanks. He plays a sober, hard-working, faithful husband and provider. His biggest sin (well, except for murdering people) is being a little emotionally withdrawn around his sons. In a touching scene, no doubt straight out of the star's own current home life, but anachronistic for his character's, he apologizes to his nine-year-old for having to miss his school concert.

Unfortunately, the family man elements that attracted Hanks make his character ludicrous. My part-Irish wife grew up on Chicago's West Side. She laughed at the depiction of the Irish hitman's family life as fond but overly formal: "Don't you think that a devout Irish Catholic father who is also a contract killer might drink a little more?" ■

Rated R for violence and bad words.

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