

Big Nanny Is Watching

A common belief, at best remotely related to reality, is that we invent technologies and then use them as we think best. Actually a technology once invented often

seems to follow a course of its own, with humanity being only an astonished and occasionally innocent bystander. So with the Internet. It came from nowhere, unasked, unexpected. It has become, say I anyway, perhaps the central fact culturally, technologically, and politically of our time. Now what?

Everyone with a keyboard has noted with horror the possibilities for social control inherent in networked computers. Yes: possibilities. I follow such things in my guise as a writer on technology for the *Washington Times*. The potential is not even slightly exaggerated. Governments of advanced countries could easily watch their entire citizenry to a degree that would have depressed Kim Il Sung. For practical purposes computing power is without limit, storage capacity infinite, the ability to collate, track, and compare phenomenal. And computers are cheap.

I see the cameras going in, always more of them. Networks abound of practically everything, waiting to be linked. Other technologies, perhaps less familiar (RFIDs, GPS) make it potentially easy to track people, automobiles, everything silently, automatically, and unobtrusively. More and more it is being done. It won't stop.

The crucial question: does it matter? The answer, I suggest, will determine the nature of the world roughly forever. (A privilege of being a columnist is that you can make sweeping dramatic statements that won't be disproved in your lifetime. But this one may actually be worth thinking about.)

Has this power of surveillance been used? What civil rights have we actually lost to technology? How many of us are intimidated by, say, knowing that the FBI can silently read our e-mail? That the government, or any private detective, can find appalling amounts of data on any of us?

Here it is important to distinguish between such things as the Patriot Act, a political abuse that could have been passed by Congress in 1930, and the effects of the Internet. The technology could serve a police state politically imposed, but a police state will not grow inevitably from the technology. I think.

It may be some societies just don't do some things. It is perfectly possible to run a police state with primitive technology. Stalin did quite well at it. The United States could have but didn't. Yes, the technological capacity for totalitarian surveillance in the U.S. is high and growing. Where is the totalitarianism? It does not follow that because we can do something stupid or pernicious we will.

Nor, alas, does it follow that we won't. The question is made more difficult because just as the capacity for surveillance has hit a genuinely high level, we have an arguably paranoid-delusional administration that seems to have skipped high-school civics, at least when the Bill of Rights was being covered. Congress is weak, the Supreme Court surreal. Maybe in 30 years, in samizdat, our time will be remembered as the beginning of total control. If so, it will have been the result of deliberate decisions by Congress.

However, the fear of rubber-truncheon dictatorship may miss the point. While the knock in the night is not America's style, bureaucratic intrusiveness is. So is politicization of the law for the benefit of specific groups. We may have more to fear from petty, distant, intellectually challenged bureaucracies than from dictators.

Some time back I wrote about roadside cameras in England that read the license plates of all cars passing on a highway. The idea, said those in charge, was to find stolen cars. Fine. However, they said, the system might also be used to catch people who owed fines or whose insurance had lapsed. This, the creeping use of universal surveillance to harass perpetrators of increasingly trivial offenses, is both likely and odious.

In the United States, I have encountered suggestions that car-tracking devices should be used to tell when particular cars have spent too much time near bars. The driver would then get a form letter suggesting that he might consider alcohol counseling. New Mexico recently defeated a bill that would have made alcohol sensors mandatory in all cars, which wouldn't start if you blew too high. One imagines extensions to red-light districts and so on. Another suggestion was round-the-clock monitoring of the speed of automobiles. Crank it up to 80 at 3 a.m. on a blankly empty interstate and the ticket arrives in the mail.

Opposing this virtuousness will put you in favor of speeding, drunk driving, prostitution, and grand theft auto. That is, the problem of surveillance in America is less likely to be state terror than an ever growing, ever tightening web of nanny-state restrictions, penalties, and admonitions for our own good as determined by remote bureaucracies beyond our influence. Spare me. ■

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*The Motorcycle Diaries*]

Radical on the Road

By Steve Sailer

ACCORDING TO CHE GUEVARA'S father, "In my son's veins flowed the blood of the Irish rebels. Che inherited some of the features of our restless ancestors ... which drew him to distant wandering, dangerous adventures, and new ideas."

A roving spirit led the messianic Argentine revolutionary to Guatemala when the CIA overthrew the leftist government in 1954, to the Congo in a disastrous military foray in 1965, and to Bolivia, betrayal, and martyrdom in 1967. Ironically, Guevara's one concrete accomplishment was, as Fidel Castro's chief executioner, to help found a regime in Cuba that enforced the diktat that those who leave may never return.

Now, when the Bush administration is granting Guevara's famous wish for "two, three, many Vietnams," Che is back. Brazilian director Walter Salles's "The Motorcycle Diaries" is an engaging picaresque recounting Guevara's 1952 journey as a pre-Communist Prince Hal with a Falstaffian friend through Argentina, Chile, and Peru.

Not surprisingly, the plot is, as Homer Simpson would say, just a bunch of stuff that happens. Taking time off from medical school, the introverted, idealistic 23-year-old Guevara and his boisterous, profane pal cross the Andes, fall off their broken-down motorbike a lot, make passes at local girls, exaggerate their medical expertise to bum meals off

impressionable yokels, lend a hand at a leper colony, and eventually have their consciousness raised about the oppression of the Andean Indians.

From Hope and Crosby through the Farrelly brothers, Hollywood has generally played this buddy-road-movie genre for laughs, so a film that, while consistently amusing, underscores the freedom and romance of the open road is refreshing. Further, South America has receded over the last generation so far from North American consciousness that Machu Picchu and the rest of the continent's immense, if slightly gloomy, landscapes seem like a revelation once more.

Young Mexican actor Gael Garcia Bernal, a conventionally pretty Latin lover-boy (with an unfortunate resemblance to "Saturday Night Live's" Chris Kattan), sensitively suffers from both the plight of the exploited workers and his terrible asthma. (Guevara was literally an adrenaline junkie: danger released the hormone that allowed him to breathe freely.) Bernal's beautiful Guevara looks like he'll mature nicely into Che's famous T-shirt image as the cotton-polyester Christ of Marxism-Leninism.

Still, Bernal lacks the Irish charm that made the adult Che resemble a hirsute leprechaun in fatigues. Oddly, Bernal's boyhood best friend, the puckish Diego Luna, his costar in "Y Tu Mamá También" (they're the Ben Affleck and Matt Damon of Mexico), is much closer to Guevara in appearance.

The subtitled "Motorcycle Diaries" goes easy on the politics (and ignores Che's obsessive anti-Americanism), barely hinting at why Dr. Guevara would soon abandon healing for killing.

At the end, Che proclaims, "We are a single mestizo race, from Mexico to the Magellan Straits." The Guevaras, however, weren't mestizo at all. They were a

family of decayed aristocrats with leftist pretensions and bohemian manners.

In practice, this mestizo myth paradoxically serves to maintain the white ascendancy. In Mexico, the corrupt ruling party with the contradictory name, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, preached that all Mexicans belong to *la raza*, the "cosmic race" perfectly blending white and Indian. This allowed the PRI, which became more and more dominated by whites as decades passed, to divert attention away from the huge gaps in wealth between whites, mestizos, and Indians. (Mexico's myth of universal *mestizaje* was prudent: in neighboring Guatemala, by contrast, race war flared throughout the 1980s.)

Similarly, the ideology allowed white revolutionaries like Guevara and Abimael Guzman, founder of Peru's Shining Path guerrillas, to justify their leadership of movements built on the brown masses' resentment of the privileges of the conquistadors' heirs. Worse, while straightforward populism could have satisfied the oppressed, the disastrous prestige of Marxism provided white radical intellectuals with an abstruse body of theory with which to intimidate the less educated into being their followers.

Unfortunately, it's an iron law of history that the countries that most need a revolution are the least likely to profit from one. The Cuban Revolution inspired Marxist upsurges in other Latin countries, which led to military crackdowns. When the armies went back to the barracks, free-market democrats took over, but, outside of Chile, largely appear to have failed. This decade's trend is toward anti-white leftist populism, like Hugo Chavez in Venezuela.

But at least white Communists like Guevara are mostly gone. By Latin America's standards, that's progress. ■

Rated R for language.