

Our Dangerous Times

Today's conservatives are eager to trade freedom for security.

By James Bovard

ON JUNE 23, the *New York Times* and other papers revealed that the Bush administration has been vacuuming up records passing through a Belgian hub for international banking. According to Treasury Undersecretary Stuart Levey, the United States government may have conducted “hundreds of thousands” of warrantless searches of personal financial data.

Some government lawyers doubt the legality of the program, and administration officials told the *Los Angeles Times* that it had only been “marginally successful” at going after al-Qaeda.

No matter. The exposé set off perhaps the biggest boom in conservative press-bashing since Watergate.

The White House quickly re-labeled the surveillance program the “Terrorist Finance Tracking Program” and with near unanimity, the Right fell into line. President Bush angrily declared, “the disclosure of this program is disgraceful... for people to leak that program, and for a newspaper to publish it, does great harm to the United States of America.” Vice President Cheney asserted that the *Times* article “made it more difficult for us to prevent attacks in the future” and “will enable the terrorists to look for ways to defeat our efforts.”

The same day the story hit the street, Andrew McCarthy whined on National Review Online: “Yet again, the *New York Times* was presented with a simple choice: help protect American national security or help al Qaeda. Yet again, it sided with al Qaeda.” Heather MacDonal commented in *The Weekly Standard*

that “The *New York Times* is a national security threat. So drunk is it on its own power and so antagonistic to the Bush administration that it will expose every classified antiterror program it finds out about, no matter how legal the program, how carefully crafted to safeguard civil liberties, or how vital to protecting American lives.”

But the notion that the program was “carefully crafted to safeguard civil liberties” was a leap of faith—and conservatives used to assume the opposite: that liberty needed to be guarded against government. There was no judicial approval of these searches and no congressional oversight of the program, but the side of the aisle once distrustful of federal schemes nodded blind assent.

Was it so long ago that prominent conservatives vigorously opposed Bill Clinton’s power grabs and his trampling of due process? Or was there a hidden asterisk noting that government power should only be limited when Democrats occupy the White House? Now security trumps—or, in reality, political promises of security. Or perhaps, like the prior proclamations of fidelity to limited government, the fixation on safety is simply another ruse to smear liberals and spur donations.

In any event, for Republican loyalists, this controversy provided twin opportunities: they could simultaneously rally around their president and vent their disdain for the mainstream media.

According to L. Brent Bozell III, president of the Media Research Center: “The last thing we need is the *New York Times*

aiding and abetting the terrorist movement. And that’s exactly what they’re doing by divulging these secrets.” Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich declared that the *New York Times* “hate[s] George W. Bush so much that they would be prepared to cripple America in order to go after the president.”

Some commentators favored solutions that could reduce the *Times*’ long-term pension liabilities. Talk show host Melanie Morgan declared that she “would have no problem with [*New York Times* editor Bill Keller] being sent to the gas chamber” if he were convicted of treason. Radio host Tammy Bruce declared that what the *Times* had done might be worse than the betrayal of atomic weapons secrets by Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

The usual suspects joined in with the usual sneers. Ann Coulter railed, “*New York Times* publisher ‘Pinch’ Sulzberger has just been named al-Qaida’s ‘Employee of the Month’ for the 12th straight month... The safest place for Osama bin Laden isn’t in Afghanistan or Pakistan; it’s in *The New York Times* building.” Columnist Michelle Malkin denounced “the Terrorist-Tipping *Times*” for “proudly publishing all the secrets unfit to spill since 9/11.” Rush Limbaugh derided the *Times*: “I think 80 percent of their subscribers have to be jihadists.”

I appeared briefly on Fox’s “Hannity & Colmes” the day the *Times* story was published, and my criticism of the warrantless surveillance provoked angry e-mails, including the helpful suggestion that “every know-nothing lying jackass

like you should be rounded up and gassed with the Iraqi poison gas that does not exist according to you.”

Few commentators raised any questions about the White House storyline. Press Secretary Tony Snow asserted: “I am absolutely sure they [the terrorists] didn’t know about” the surveillance program the *Times* exposed. Snow and indignant conservatives seem to assume that al Qaeda funders are as dumb as the Miami “terrorists” busted the same day the *Times* story came out. These are the wizards who begged their FBI informant for money to buy shoes and asked him to provide them with military uniforms so that they could march into federal office buildings and take them over. In reality, Bush has repeatedly talked of aggressive efforts to surveil international financial transactions, and administration officials testified to Congress that al Qaeda was avoiding large banking systems and instead relying on cash couriers.

The Bush administration simplified the issue: freedom of the press kills. Snow warned that “the *New York Times* and other news organizations ought to think long and hard about whether the public’s right to know, in some cases, might overwrite somebody’s right to live.” Treasury Secretary John Snow, in a letter to Bill Keller, denounced the *Times* article as “irresponsible and harmful to the security of Americans and freedom-loving people worldwide.” “Freedom-loving people” thus becomes a trump card against the First Amendment. And “freedom of the press” threatens to become the single biggest obstacle to the U.S. government forcibly imposing freedom on the rest of the world.

Republican members of Congress hustled onto the bandwagon. Rep. Peter King, chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, declared, “We’re at war, and for the *Times* to release information about secret operations and methods is treasonous.” Rep. Ted Poe con-

demned the “Benedict Arnold Press.” Rep. Tom Price wailed that “some in the media seem determined time and again to simply hand over our playbook to barbaric terrorists.” Rep. Jack Kingston simplified the issue wonderfully: “It’s one thing to mix your criticism with [Bush] with your war position, but it’s another thing to mix your hatred of George Bush with putting people’s lives in danger.”

Moreover, Republicans exploited the *Times* story to give themselves and the Bush administration pre-emptive absolution in case inept federal agencies fail to deter future terrorist onslaughts. House Speaker Dennis Hastert declared, “Loose lips kill American people.” Rep. Peter King said that the *Times* would be to blame if there is another terrorist attack in the U.S.: “The blood will be on their hands.”

The House, voting on party lines, passed a nonbinding resolution that “condemns the unauthorized disclosure of classified information by those persons responsible and expresses concern that the disclosure may endanger the lives of American citizens.” They overlook the fact that Bush administration officials routinely distribute classified information to friendly media sources when they think it will win points.

Since the Watergate era, it has been a Washington commonplace that “the cover-up is worse than the crime.” But in the post-9/11 era, exposure is worse than abuse. Rather than suffering any sort of backlash from the intrusive program, Bush and Cheney are milking *Times*-bashing at Republican fundraisers around the country.

The vast majority of conservative commentators have never shown the slightest interest in the efficacy of the administration’s antiterrorism policies and share the Bush-Cheney attitude that a federal program is legal if the president says so. It seems to be widely assumed that what is good for Bush is

good for America, so cheering on the war will make us safe.

Survival of the Republican congressional majority may hinge on suppressing criticism of administration policies, and this storm of media-bashing may be crafted to keep the lid on news about other government surveillance systems. Over a period of barely six months, leaks resulted in Americans learning that the feds were conducting thousands of warrantless phone taps in the U.S., that they had arm-twisted telephone companies to turn over the calling records of tens of millions of Americans, and that our government has been sifting through international banking records to its heart’s content. *National Journal* recently revealed that the Bush administration is continuing to pursue Total Information Awareness, even though Congress compelled the formal abandonment of that program in 2003. The endless threats of treason prosecutions against whistleblowers, reporters, and editors may be a last ditch attempt to prevent Americans from learning about secret presidential orders that would make the NSA wiretapping look like kids’ stuff.

Just because much of the media is biased does not mean that the Bush administration is trustworthy. Perhaps it is naïve to expect commentators to be more honest than politicians. But the “treason” stampede among right-wing talking heads indicates just how much conservatism has changed. And the Right’s knee-jerk defense of every Bush power grab has so decimated their credibility that prominent conservatives will have as much standing to gripe about Leviathan during a reign of someone like Hillary Clinton as her husband has to complain that American culture no longer respects chastity. ■

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Mother Russia No More

While the Cold War impoverished it, post-communist Russia must confront a new deficit: more deaths than births.

By Pavel Kohout

RUSSIA HAS A BIG PROBLEM. No, it's neither a war nor terrorism. Nor the economy, which is in good shape. By most measures, Russia has never been doing better than now. The economy quickly recovered from the financial and banking crisis of 1997. Public finance, too, is prospering as the oil and gas windfall swells the trade balance and helps to pay down Russia's once terrifying debt.

The government has enough money to improve the situation of pensioners and other poor social groups. State-employed workers—government officials, policemen, doctors, nurses, teachers—are also seeing their salaries increase. According to some observers, salary raises for public servants have already visibly mitigated the problem of corruption. Taking bribes was once necessary to make a living, as official salaries were next to negligible; this is no longer true.

The rising post-communist nations of Central and Eastern Europe, including Russia, are often referred to as New Europe, with the capital "N" proudly denoting rosy growth prospects for the recently freed half of the European continent. Russia's GDP has grown by 5.5 percent over the past year. Estonia has experienced an 11.5 percent boom, and Latvia's economy has added 13.8 percent.

Impressive, isn't it? Remember the winter of 1990? Germans were sending food aid to struggling Russians. Now

starvation and empty shelves are but a distant memory, and Russians—as well as other East Europeans—are discovering the attractions of a developed consumer-oriented economy. As household incomes grow, so do consumer expenditures: everybody wants a flat-screen TV, a new car, a new home.

Mortgages and credit cards stand behind the improvement of living standards. In the Czech Republic, when the mortgage business started back in 1996, there were double-digit rates, drastic income requirements, and only 50 percent maximum coverage of the property value. The application process alone was martyrdom. Now, rates are in single digits, the coverage is usually 100 percent, and the process is hassle-free.

So what is the problem? Many papers have been written about the demographic slump of the European Union, but the EU's population woes pale in comparison to the mass dying out of East Europeans.

As material welfare and prosperity advance, one would expect that people would have more confidence in the economy and thus bear more children. People form families when they are doing well and feeling safe, don't they?

No, they apparently don't. Russians seemingly prefer consumption to child bearing and rearing. Despite some very modest improvement over recent years, the total fertility rate remains well below the hurdle of 2.1, which is necessary to maintain a stable population. By 2005,

the population of Russia had declined to 143.5 million people, reduced by over 5 million since 1993. And according to demographic forecasts, within two decades, the Russian population could decrease to 130 million.

Until approximately 1990, the birthrates in Russia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Ukraine, Slovakia, Romania, and Poland were fluctuating around 2.0, a shade below replacement level. What happened after the fall of communism? What caused the decline? One common answer is the hedonism and selfishness of the young generation, and to some extent that may be true. But that easy answer is far from complete.

The first question one should ask is why birthrates were relatively high under the communist regimes. Did people love communists so much? Did they believe in the stability and prosperity of the centrally planned economies?

No, they did not. Most people in communist countries hated the regimes. To a person who has never experienced such oppression, it is difficult to explain the peculiarities of daily life under a communist totalitarian regime, but for starts, the word "career" was a dirty one. A decent person would hardly seek a very ambitious career since that usually required collaboration with the Communist Party or, worse yet, the secret police. People thus had lots of time for their families since very few workers would find it worthwhile to work overtime. A poor performer could not have