

POST SNOWDEN: THE GOVERNMENT DOUBLES DOWN ON HARD POWER

I was asked to participate in a CATO debate about where we are a year post Snowden. My contribution to that debate – in which I argue any big drama going forward will come from the newly adversarial relationship between Google and the NSA – is here.

As part of that, I argued that the government made a choice after Snowden: to double down on hard power over soft power.

The conflict between Google and its home country embodies another trend that has accelerated since the start of the Snowden leaks. As the [President of the Computer & Communications Industry Association, Edward Black, testified before the Senate last year](#), the disclosure of NSA overreach did not just damage some of America's most successful companies, it also undermined the key role the Internet plays in America's soft power projection around the world: as the leader in Internet governance, and as the forum for open speech and exchange once associated so positively with the United States.

The U.S. response to Snowden's leaks has, to a significant degree, been to double down on hard power, on the imperative to "collect it all" and the insistence that the best cyberdefense is an aggressive cyberoffense. While President Obama [paid lip service](#) to stopping short of spying "because we can," the Executive Branch has refused to do anything – especially legislatively – that would impose real controls on the surveillance system that undergirds raw power.

And that will likely bring additional costs, not just to America's economic position in the world, but in the need to invest in programs to maintain that raw power advantage. Particularly given the paltry results the NSA has to show for its domestic phone dragnet – the single Somali taxi driver donating to al-Shabaab that Sanchez described. It's not clear that the additional costs from doubling down on hard power bring the United States any greater security.

Because I was writing this essay, that's largely where my mind has been as we debate getting re-involved in Iraq.

In the 3 or 4 wars we've waged in the Middle East/South Asia since 9/11 (counting Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria), we've only managed to further destabilize the region. That was largely driven by a belligerence that goes well beyond our imperative to collect it all.

But I do think both the Snowden anniversary and the Iraq clusterfuck should focus far more energy on how we try to serve American interests through persuasion rather than bombs and dragnets.