

OBAMA'S DRAGNET: POLICEMAN OF THE WHOLE WORLD

And don't let anybody make you think that God chose America as his divine, messianic force to be a sort of policeman of the whole world. God has a way of standing before the nations with judgment, and it seems that I can hear God saying to America, "You're too arrogant! And if you don't change your ways, I will rise up and break the backbone of your power, and I'll place it in the hands of a nation that doesn't even know my name. Be still and know that I'm God."

—Martin Luther King, "It's A Dark Day In Our Nation"

As I noted the other day, in his speech on the dragnet, President Obama acknowledged that our unique technical surveillance capabilities demands more humility, not less.

But America's capabilities are unique. And the power of new technologies means that there are fewer and fewer technical constraints on what we can do. That places a special obligation on us to ask tough questions about what we should do.

Yet that concern about our unique technical capabilities quickly transformed into exceptionalism – a concern about how distrust stemming from our dragnet hubris would corrode our "leadership" position in the world.

Instead, we have to make some important decisions about how to protect ourselves and sustain our leadership in the world, while upholding the civil liberties and privacy protections that

our ideals – and our Constitution – require. We need to do so not only because it is right, but because the challenges posed by threats like terrorism, proliferation, and cyber-attacks are not going away any time soon, and for our intelligence community to be effective over the long haul, we must maintain the trust of the American people, and people around the world.

And that, in turn, became our role in protecting “our friends and allies as well.”

Our capabilities help protect not only our own nation, but our friends and allies as well. Our efforts will only be effective if ordinary citizens in other countries have confidence that the United States respects their privacy too. And the leaders of our close friends and allies deserve to know that if I want to learn what they think about an issue, I will pick up the phone and call them, rather than turning to surveillance. In other words, just as we balance security and privacy at home, our global leadership demands that we balance our security requirements against our need to maintain trust and cooperation among people and leaders around the world.

This includes protecting them not just from terrorism and hackers, but from crime – including the crime of violating US sanctions.

In terms of our bulk collection of signals intelligence, U.S. intelligence agencies will only use such data to meet specific security requirements: counter-intelligence; counter-terrorism; counter-proliferation; cyber-security; force protection for our troops and allies; and combating transnational crime, including sanctions evasion.

Of course, a number of countries (much of Latin America) object to the way we fight crime (drug cartels) in their countries. But our pursuit of our own national security has literally turned us into the world's policeman. Which Obama repeats again – our leadership role requires us to use our dragnet to fight terrorists and crime.

We will appoint a senior official at the White House to implement the new privacy safeguards that I have announced today. I will devote the resources to centralize and improve the process we use to handle foreign requests for legal assistance, keeping our high standards for privacy while helping foreign partners fight crime and terrorism.

How ironic, how prescient, that King spoke our arrogance breaking the backbone of our power. Not only does it threaten to break the ideological backbone of our hegemony – replacing our liberties with our policing – but it quite literally threatens to balkanize the communication backbone we've exploited to become that policeman.

President Obama seems to understand what a crisis this poses to our leadership. He does not, yet, understand that that leadership was not supposed to be policing the world.