

The Two Minutes Laugh

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself...
FDR

In talking to friends, family and strangers who live and work in NYC, it becomes clear that many people were deeply affected by the terror delivered to their doorstep. The shockwaves of fear radiating from the World Trade Center have motivated many in our country to trade restraints on our liberty for a false sense of security, unable or unwilling to live with the risk of danger that results from true freedom.

Although the reductions in our freedoms fly in the face of the fundamental principals upon which our democratic nation were found, the mindset of the frightened seem to have spread to the U.S. Senators and Congressmen who passed the Patriot Act in the weeks following the 9/11 tragedy. In addition to supplying additional funding for U.S. government intelligence (an oxymoron highlighted by the attack), this Act removed several impediments to the government's surveillance of citizens.

A reading of The Patriot Act reveals many layers. At one level, it exposes the labyrinth that is federal law; proscribing changes in numerous other laws and statutes that redefine the meaning of previous legislation. This makes the law seem innocuous unless you're ready to tackle the thousands of pages of affected law. At another level, it engages in the type of nationalistic statement necessary for any war machine to thrive. More deeply, the Act increases the depths of surveillance that the Government can have in all of our lives. This surveillance takes many forms, removing constraints on governmental wiretaps that can track both voice calls and Internet data while increasing the use of camera-based surveillance in public places, all of which undermines basic Constitutional rights to privacy and protections from unreasonable search and seizure. It also more broadly defines terrorism, to include, in the minds of the Eletronic Frontier Foundation and ACLU among numerous others, acts of protest that include even incidental violence.

This compromise evokes the warnings of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, who anticipated the danger of an over-empowered government intelligence apparatus. In *1984*, Orwell highlights the kind of mind control a government can have when pervasive surveillance is introduced. One example from the book is the "Two Minutes Hate", in which the citizenry gathered in public and were presented with images of the enemy of the party, to which they were to react with a seething hatred. This kind of hatred, when practiced in a group and repeated over and over again, helped support a war machine that drove the economy and reinforced the power of the state and party.

Orwell's fictional warning invites an alarmingly close closely parallel to the current state-driven wargasm, broadcast into your living room 24 x 7 by the six corporations that control 90-odd percent of what Americans see, hear and read, a machine I'll call Big Media.

Although our government is not fairly represented by *1984*'s monolithic Ministries of Truth, Peace, Love and Plenty (ironies, all), it is nonetheless complicit in managing the American mindset. Rather than legislating anger, as Orwell envisioned, our government peddles fear out of one side of its mouth while promising security out of the other. The security, they're reluctant to tell you, comes at a price of your civil liberties, especially the rights to privacy and the protection against unreasonable search.

One of the most pervasive tools of the increased surveillance is the camera, especially those in public spaces. In cities big and small, buildings public and private, the actions of millions of Americans are recorded each day. The availability of functional face recognition software signals the beginning of an age where your actions can be tracked to your identity. While the practicality of applying this technology to each apartment lobby and street corner may lead the rational to dismiss the warning, the application of Moore's Law (that the computational power of the silicone chip will double every 18 months) and the corollary geometric increase in communications bandwidth make ubiquitous monitoring of individuals a very real possibility in the future.

Consider the following glimpse of this future, courtesy of a recent visit to Vegas that would make Hunter S. Thompson proud (and very, very paranoid). The sun was coming up as we were coming down on the gaming floor of the Hard Rock Casino. A member of our party was still optimistic about his chances of a romantic rendezvous, and was chatting up a rather cute woman. Or so we thought. As thick fellows in dark clothes converged on our spot, one stepped forward and asked this woman to leave. It turns out not only that she was under the legal age to be in a casino, but she had passed a fake ID to a bartender in another part of the hotel three hours prior. After a short protest, the casino representative told her they not only had the ID, but the tape of her handing it to the bartender.

While this incident earned the friend in question a bit of good natured hassling, it pretty well weirded me out. What else did our hosts know about what was going on? Based on what some people were holding, I'm not sure I want to know.

As a private entity, Las Vegas casinos are allowed more latitude on their intrusion into our actions than the Feds are. So far. Imagine that upon passing through screening for a Republican rally, you were denied entrance based upon your recent attendance of an Islamic film festival or your purchase of a subversive magazine.

Laws like the Patriot Act and the related pervasiveness of video cameras lead us down a road where our public actions are catalogued and cross-referenced, and dissent is less tolerated. While this future may seem far off to some, the technologies are already being employed at high security checkpoints. What's more, the laws of that future are being written today.

As we set these precedents in law and security practice, I prefer we promote individual freedom over perceived security. How shall we value the defense of the country if it comes at the cost of our core values? The acceptance of and battle against the danger

supplied by the demented among us, both foreign and domestic (who can forget that in the hours following the OK City bombings we were all convinced it had been an act of Islamic terrorists?) should not be subsumed to a false sense of security.

In the same manner, I prefer fresh, unpasteurized orange juice to sanitized orange drink, full of preservatives and artificial flavors. The truth, even with the possible danger of bacteria, is real: nutritional and natural. The perceived safety, in both increased surveillance and orange drink, is based on lies, deception and in at least one case, pretty colors and the hollow buzz of high fructose corn syrup.

Unfortunately, our government has begun to remove that choice. Don't accept the reduction in your freedom for the pretty colors of 'safety.'

To that end, I suggest an active and peaceful protest to the encroaching surveillance. I suggest we all laugh. To get angry is to give your emotions to the fear that drives the process. The Hindu culture includes a tradition of daily laughter. Although initially awkward to the western mind, these group laughs are infectious and powerful. In addition to the chemical releases that make the body and mind feel better, the group laugh frees the spirit to allow light to triumph over darkness.

So, on each Tuesday at 2:00 in the afternoon, with proper homage to George Orwell along with his protagonists Winston and Julia, we should all participate in the Two Minutes Laugh.

En masse, we can all laugh. The public demonstrations of laughter would become infectious, growing each day. Imagine a simple sign – HA HA! – seen on surveillance cameras around the world. Within Orwell's Big Brother metaphor, imagine what the control room would look like if a majority of the cameras were filled with the image – HA HA!

Make big signs for public spaces. Take them to political rallies. Make a small card that you put in front of the fisheye surveillance cameras at ATMs. Put stickers on your cars that can be read by the cameras in police cruisers. Join others with these signs in daily laughter.

Let them know that – HA HA! – the joke's on them. We're fundamentally free, and in ironic simpatico with the citizens in *1984* we laugh at their attempts to control our thoughts and actions, to take our freedom.