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The dangers of unaccountable leakers of classified data

Pat Perriello | Jun. 24, 2013 NCR Today

I feel compelled to elaborate a bit on my recent comments [1] regarding the leaking of classified information by Edward Snowden, who, according to the latest reports, has now left Hong Kong.

I think much of the concern about government overreach has been around for generations. One must ask, however: What role does government play in keeping us safe? If there were a terrorist attack on our country tomorrow, our first question would be whether the government had done everything possible to protect us. Even in the Boston Marathon bombing, people wondered whether the government should have pursued data further than they did or followed tips from Russia or other possible sources more thoroughly. No one asked whether the government was too intrusive in ferreting out information to capture the bombers.

There must certainly be a proper balance, as President Barack Obama has said. This young group of Internet enthusiasts, however, seems quite troubling to me. Their position seems to be that all information needs to be made public, and they have an obligation to disseminate this information.

Edward Snowden provides an example of an extraordinary exercise of power. He receives a high security clearance that provides him access to all the secrets of government. He doesn't bother to tell anyone that he doesn't believe in government secrets. He is suddenly in a position to expose any secret he chooses at any possible moment. He can have the entire country sitting in fear as to what secret he may expose next. Talk about your 15 minutes of fame.

Worse yet, he seems to be one of many who share such a viewpoint. The government is now and for the foreseeable future vulnerable to those who want to cause a disruption, who believe in total transparency and, as I said in my earlier comments, who do not care who could be harmed by their desire to get the truth out. If you believe that the government has gone too far in some of these programs and you want appropriate modifications made to the law, I can support that. If the goal is to shut down American intelligence operations, you can be quite effective because there is no way to know what you plan to do and therefore no way to stop it.

The question is, What do you actually believe about government secrets? To what extent are they necessary to protect our way of life? I remember vividly when President Dwight D. Eisenhower was caught spying on Russia in 1960 [2], FrancisGary Powers' U-2 spy plane was shot down over Russia. Eisenhower lied about our involvement in the incident.

The country was shocked. I know I was. Eisenhower was seen as a man of the utmost integrity who would never stoop to such behavior. The age of innocence was truly shattered for many Americans. We were really spying on the Russians. That was something the other guy did. We didn't do that kind of thing, and certainly Eisenhower would never do such a thing then lie about it.

Well, we have been spying ever since. We are still spying, and we are not so innocent to believe that such things don't happen. There is nothing shocking in the revelations of Edward Snowden. I'm sure the Russians or Chinese weren't shocked. We shouldn't be, either.

What is Edward Snowden trying to say? Are Russia and China somehow superior to the United States in their behavior? Is that why Snowden decided to go to Hong Kong?

What is clear is you can't very well run a program seeking intelligence if there are people out there who believe they should print your every move on the front page of the newspaper. Those who are so offended by these intelligence gathering programs need to ask themselves what their goal is. Do they want the government to stop gathering intelligence? Do they want to make sure any attempt to gather necessary information is disrupted?

I believe Edward Snowden and his ideas represent an extremely dangerous development in our country. Yes, acceptance of our intelligence community requires a certain amount of faith in government. I understand that too many people out there don't possess that faith. Are they willing to place their faith in the Edward Snowden's of the world? I, for one, am not.

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