

Before PRISM there was Total Information Awareness

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By Chris
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This week, not only is Barack Obama and his family in Africa, but so too is George W. Bush, along with his wife Laura. The couple were renovating a health clinic in Zambia when they decided to gift us all with some rare post-retirement facetime. And President Bush took the opportunity to weigh in on the massive domestic surveillance scheme known as PRISM that began under his watch and remained secret until last month when information about the program, leaked by Edward Snowden, was published by the *Guardian* and the *Washington Post*.

The PRISM program—in which the NSA is able to collect and then search Americans' internet data—did indeed begin during the Bush administration. And the program's ancestry is both fascinating and infuriating. The roots of it stretch all the way back to a program called Total Information Awareness.

Now if that name rings a bell, it should. Because when it was proposed, in the wake of 9/11, it got a huge amount of press.

Total Information Awareness was the brainchild of John Poindexter, the Reagan administration official who got his conviction in the Iran-Contra scandal overturned on appeal. At the time, it was designed to be a sweeping new electronic data-mining program, to access all sorts of digital information from just about anywhere.

The idea was that a potential terrorist would leave a digital trail. But in order to find that trail, you had to collect all of the digital information there was, from anywhere and everywhere you could find it. And the program had this creepy Illuminati logo, of a pyramid with this all-seeing eye looking down on the earth.

If you were to ask Alex Jones to design a logo to make every single neuron in his conspiratorial brain fire, this would be it. It's almost as if the government was trying to troll conspiracy theorists. But Total Information Awareness was creepy enough that it didn't just set off the Alex Joneses of the world.

There was a huge backlash against the idea of just collecting everyone's data. From left, right and center, it sounded to a lot of folks like the kind of data mining that treats everyone in America as a potential terror suspect. So Congress used the 2004 defense appropriations bill to defund Total Information Awareness.

But that was not the end of the story. Because allowing a program that's being rejected by the American citizenry to die off is not the only option when you happen to be working on surveillance. Option number two is just doing it anyway, but secretly.

Here's how journalist Shane Harris, one of the best-sourced reporters in the world on the NSA, described to *Fresh Air's* Terry Gross what happened in the wake of the backlash, after Total Information Awareness [TIA] was defunded:

TIA would be, as they say, defunded from the defense budget. But all the money for it would be moved over to the classified side of the budget—the black budget as it's often called. And it was disbanded in name, and all of the various components of the research program were separated, were given new cover names, and almost all of them were then shifted over to the management control of the National Security Agency. Which unbeknownst everyone in America—most people in America at the time—had been running its own Total Information Awareness program.

[...]

So TIA is shut down publicly. And privacy advocates really declared a great victory for this, but

unbeknownst to them, the work just continued in secret at the NSA, and became part of this larger vast surveillance apparatus that we're learning more about now.

Or in other words, the beginning of what would essentially become PRISM—the formerly-secret NSA data-mining program we're all just now learning about.

Now, in the uproar over PRISM, there has been a tendency to focus on privacy concerns: Is the government reading my Facebook messages? But I think that's a mistake. Because, quite frankly, no one really has privacy anymore to begin with. Most of us have willingly handed all of our information over to Google.

No, the real problem is the secrecy. The problem is that we didn't know about this. We didn't sign off on it. Because secrecy acts to insulate the government from the most basic kind of democratic accountability.

When Barack Obama proposed the Affordable Care Act, lots of people freaked out about it. They talked about death panels and being on the slippery slope to socialized medicine. But because people didn't like it, the president couldn't just take the Affordable Care Act and move it into the black budget. He wasn't able to say: Well people don't like my idea, so we're just going to set-up the insurance exchanges in secret, with secret money.

Because that's not the way democracies work. Nothing in the domestic sphere operates under those principles. You have to have the argument with people and convince them that you're right, or face the consequences. Those are the basic ground rules of self government. And it is incredibly toxic to any democracy to have this other channel you can just switch to whenever you might lose the argument.

I'm not concerned by what the NSA is doing because I think they might read my Facebook messages. I'm concerned because the NSA is spending billions of dollars, doing all sorts of stuff, that I, as a United States citizen, never got to sign off on.

Democracies can and must be able to have secrets, and in fact all democracies do. But what decent, functioning democracies worthy of the name cannot have are huge, multi-billion dollar programs, and bureaucracies, and laws, and legal frameworks, and authorizations that are invisible to their citizens.

Justice may be blind; citizens cannot be.