

Wars and Diffusion of Responsibility

In watching old world war movies, it's easy to get caught up in the main events. We see soldiers breaking into the homes of innocents, we see people being thrown into the streets, we see authorities stop and beat people for nothing more than their race, nationality, or ethnicity. Look around, what we don't see is the neighbors trying to stop them.

There's a phenomenon in sociology and psychology called the diffusion of responsibility. Basically, the more people that witness an ambiguous but potentially tragic event the less likely any of them are to help. People look to each other to interpret the event and generally conclude that if something's to be done someone else should do it.

This, I suspect, lies behind the passivity in the Edward Snowden affair. I think we like to think if our government tried to do to us what it's doing to him, our neighbors would stand in the streets and stop them. Snowden revealed to us that our government is spying on each of us, collecting records of our travels, who we call, what we buy, what we read, who we associate it, all to protect us from terrorists who would end our "freedom." Freedom isn't just an abstract word, it's shown in specific guarantees, such as the right to assemble, to speak one's mind on political matters, the right to a fair trial, the right to secure our homes and our papers against government intrusion. What does it mean to secure what the government is already reading? What does it mean to require a warrant to attach a GPS if the government can just follow us through the GPS most of us willingly carry with us.

The Edward Snowden situation is about abuse of government power. At every step, our government and the governments of the world are making clear that spying on each of us is the new status quo. Our neighbors feel the situation is ambiguous and are waiting for someone else to help. With this, we don't need terrorists to take out freedom; we are voting it away.

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