

Restraining Government Surveillance Powers

Alex Marthews, national Chair, Restore The Fourth

The project of our collective liberation depends on restraining government surveillance powers.

First, no meaningful progress is possible without organizing; where governments can surveil without restraint, organizing is strangled in the crib. We must be able to form our thoughts and plan collectively, without hostile governments continually looking over our shoulders, with the intent to surveil, harass, detain or kill.

Second, liberation will not be liberation if it involves ongoing, suspicionless monitoring by the State, even if that monitoring is motivated by a sincere desire for the betterment of humanity. The tendency on the part of a small minority to believe they know what is best for others is anathema to collective liberation.

POLICY BACKGROUND

Government Surveillance Abuses in the U.S.

The surveillance state is the keystone of U.S. imperialism. Over time, beginning with the post-WWII “UKUSA” agreement, the U.S. has steadily expanded the reach and capabilities of its intelligence agencies. “Foreign intelligence collection” programs by NSA underpin CIA’s destabilizing of socialist governments; the threat of withdrawing access to U. S. government “intelligence-sharing” is [routinely used](#) to keep allied governments in line. The same collection programs facilitate FBI repression of U.S. dissidents, such as [Black Lives Matter](#) and [Gaza ceasefire protesters](#). The U.S. Department of Homeland Security, through its “Urban Areas Security Initiative” and other programs, subsidizes the adoption of police surveillance technologies at the state and local level, making it hard even for anti-surveillance local elected officials to resist police requests. Beyond direct government funding, a private and poorly publicized ecosystem of “police foundations” and donations by billionaires, finance pilot programs for new technology deployments, like in [Baltimore](#) or [San Francisco](#). The technologies themselves are rapidly advancing, with facial recognition and artificial intelligence making it harder and harder to preserve one’s anonymity in public. The courts are often highly deferential to “public safety” and “national security” justifications.

The politics of surveillance reform are [complex](#). Over the last 20 years, Democrats have generally shifted from having a majority opposed to the surveillance abuses of the Bush administration, to being full-throated defenders of the intelligence agencies and of State institutions more generally, against the hostile takeover of those institutions by Trump. Conversely, elected Republicans have often shifted from reflexive deference to the intelligence agencies, to a more skeptical approach, albeit one that foregrounds surveillance abuses against elements of their own base, such as religious extremists, J6 insurrectionists, and parents hostile to COVID restrictions in schools. Socialist, Green and Libertarian parties have consistently

avored reforms of the kind outlined below. When these reforms are polled, they routinely command the support of [more than two-thirds of the American public](#).

POLICY PROPOSALS

The Social Democrats of America should endorse the following specific policies:

1. Restrictions on U.S. government collection, including:
 - a. Congressional oversight of executive-branch surveillance programs authorized under the Reagan-era Executive Order 12,333
 - b. A default prohibition on the U.S. government acquiring from data brokers, tech firms, or other commercial sources, data on U. S. persons, where direct acquisition of such data by a government agency would require a warrant (*Passed by the U. S. House in 2024, under the name "The Fourth Amendment Is Not For Sale Act", but not taken up by the Senate*)
 - c. Repeal the REAL ID Act of 2005, permitting states to not include gender markers on state drivers' licenses, and removing the envisioned REAL ID requirement for domestic flights or admission to federal buildings.
2. Restrictions on U.S. government querying of data it already has, including:
 - a. A default requirement for a warrant where a U.S. government agency seeks to query NSA "foreign intelligence" databases (*Failed to pass the U. S. House by a single vote, 212-212, in April 2024*)
3. Limitations on federal-state data sharing and cooperation
 - a. End the "Urban Area Security Initiative"'s funding for surveillance technologies.
 - b. Abolish "Joint Terrorism Task Forces", "Homeland Security Task Forces" and other similar federal-state partnerships that skirt oversight and accountability.
 - c. Redirect "high-intensity drug trafficking corridor", "counter-terrorism center", "real-time crime center", and "fusion center" funding, bringing them under FEMA as climate and disaster preparedness centers.
4. Explicit federal bans on the following:
 - a. U. S. law enforcement use of drones that are armed or that use facial recognition, or for use in monitoring protests or other civil disturbances.
 - b. U. S. law enforcement use of facial recognition technology.
 - c. U. S. law enforcement use of covert surveillance cameras.
 - d. U. S. law enforcement use of cell-site simulators (sometimes called "Stingrays")
 - e. U. S. prosecutorial use of "[parallel construction](#)", which is used to conceal the use of all of the tools above, and to conceal the use of NSA-derived information to harass and prosecute disfavored people in the United States.

More generally, the Social Democrats of America should endorse the comprehensive array of reforms contained in the excellent [Government Surveillance Reform Act of 2023](#), which also includes (1a), (1b), (2a) and (4b) above.