



Postcards From a Police State: 22 Years of Blowback From the USA Patriot Act



John Whitehead

Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. [It works the same in any country.](#)

—Hermann Goering, German military commander and Hitler's designated successor

For those who remember the days and months that followed 9/11, there is an unnerving feeling of déjà vu about the Hamas attacks on Israel.

The same shocking images of carnage and grief dominating the news. The same disbelief that anyone could be so hateful, so monstrous, so evil as to do this to another human being. The same outpourings of support and unity from around the world. The same shared fear that this could easily have happened to us or our loved ones.

Now once again the drums of war are sounding on the world stage, not that they ever really stopped. Israel is preparing to invade Gaza, the Palestinians are nearing a humanitarian crisis, and the rest of the world is bracing for whatever blowback comes next.

Here in the United States, as we approach the 22nd anniversary of the USA Patriot Act on October 26, we're still grappling with the blowback that arises from allowing one's freedoms to be eviscerated in exchange for the phantom promise of security.

Here are a few lessons that we never learned or learned too late.

Mammoth legislation that expands the government's powers at the citizenry's expense will not make anyone safer. Rushed through Congress a mere 45 days after the 9/11 attacks, the [USA Patriot Act drove a stake through the heart of the Bill of Rights](#), undermined civil liberties, expanded the government's powers and opened the door to far-reaching surveillance by the government on American citizens.

Pre-emptive strikes will only lead to further blowback. Not content to wage war against Afghanistan, which served as the base for Osama bin Laden, the U.S. embarked on a [pre-emptive war against Iraq](#) in order to "stop any adversary challenging America's military superiority and adopt a strike-first policy against terrorist threats 'before they're fully formed.'" We are still suffering the [consequences of this failed policy](#), which resulted in lives lost, taxpayer dollars wasted, the fomenting of hatred against the U.S. and the further [radicalization of terrorist cells](#).

War is costly. There are many reasons to go to war, but those who have advocated that the U.S.



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remain at war, year after year, are the very entities that have profited most from these endless military occupations and exercises. Thus far, the U.S. taxpayer has been made to shell out more than [\\$8 trillion to wage wars abroad](#), including [the lifetime price of health care for disabled veterans and interest on the national debt](#). That also does not include the more than hundreds of thousands of civilians killed, or the millions displaced from their homes as a result of endless drone strikes and violence.

The tactics and weapons of war, once deployed abroad, will eventually be used against the citizenry at home. The horrors that took place at Abu Ghraib, the American-run prison in Iraq, involved “US military personnel humiliating, hurting and abusing Iraqi prisoners in a myriad of perverse ways. [While American servicemen and women smiled and gave thumbs up, naked men were threatened by dogs, or were hooded, forced into sexual positions, placed standing with wires attached to their bodies, or left bleeding on prison floors.](#)” Adding to the descent into moral depravity, the United States government legalized the use of torture, including waterboarding, in violation of international law and in the so-called pursuit of national security. The ramifications have been far-reaching, with domestic police mirroring a battlefield mindset in their encounters with American citizens, including the use of torture tactics at secret locations such as [Homan Square in Chicago](#).

Allowing the government to spy on the citizenry will not reduce acts of terrorism, but it will result in a watched, submissive, surveillance society. Not only did the USA Patriot Act normalize the government’s mass surveillance powers, but it also dramatically expanded the government’s authority to spy on its own citizens without much of any oversight. Thus, a byproduct of this post 9/11-age in which we live, whether you’re walking through a store, driving your car, checking email, or talking to friends and family on the phone, you can be sure that some government agency is listening in and tracking your behavior. This doesn’t even begin to touch on the corporate trackers that monitor your purchases, web browsing, Facebook posts and other activities taking place in the cyber sphere. We have all become data collected in government files.

News-cycle distractions are calibrated to ensure that you lose sight of what the government is doing. The average American has a hard time keeping up with and remembering all of the “events,” manufactured or otherwise, which occur like clockwork and keep us distracted, deluded, amused, and insulated from the reality of the American police state. Whether these events are critical or unimportant, when we’re being bombarded with wall-to-wall news coverage and news cycles that change every few days, it’s difficult to stay focused on one thing—namely, holding the government accountable to abiding by the rule of law—and the powers-that-be understand this. In this way, regularly scheduled trivia and/or distractions that keep the citizenry tuned into the various breaking news headlines and entertainment spectacles also keep them tuned out to the government’s steady encroachments on their freedoms.

If you stop holding the government accountable to the rule of law, the only laws it abides by will be the ones used to clamp down on the citizenry. Having failed to hold government officials accountable to abiding by the rule of law, the American people have found themselves saddled with [a government that skirts, flouts and violates the Constitution](#) with little consequence. Overcriminalization, asset forfeiture schemes, police brutality, profit-driven prisons, warrantless surveillance, SWAT team raids, indefinite detentions, covert agencies, and secret courts are just a few of the egregious practices carried out by a government that operates beyond the reach of the law.

Do not turn your country into a battlefield, your citizens into enemy combatants, and your law enforcement officers into extensions of the military. A standing army—something that propelled



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the early colonists into revolution—strips the citizenry of any vestige of freedom. How can there be any semblance of freedom when there are tanks in the streets, military encampments in cities, Blackhawk helicopters and armed drones patrolling overhead? It was for this reason that those who established America vested control of the military in a civilian government, with a civilian commander-in-chief. They did not want a military government, ruled by force. Rather, they opted for a republic bound by the rule of law: the U.S. Constitution. Unfortunately, we in America now find ourselves struggling to retain some semblance of freedom in the face of police and law enforcement agencies that look and act like the military and have just as little regard for the Fourth Amendment, laws such as the NDAA that allow the military to arrest and indefinitely detain American citizens, and military drills that acclimate the American people to the sight of armored tanks in the streets, military encampments in cities, and combat aircraft patrolling overhead.

As long as you remain fearful and distrustful of each other, you will be incapable of standing united against any threats posed by a power-hungry government. Early on, U.S. officials solved the problem of how to implement their authoritarian policies without incurring a citizen uprising: fear. The powers-that-be want us to feel threatened by forces beyond our control (terrorists, shooters, bombers). They want us afraid and dependent on the government and its militarized armies for our safety and well-being. Most of all, they want us distrustful of each other, divided by our prejudices, and at each other's throats.

Once you trade your freedom for security, the terrorists win. We've walked a strange and harrowing road since September 11, 2001, littered with the debris of our once-vaunted liberties. We have gone from a nation that took great pride in being a model of a representative democracy to being a model of how to persuade a freedom-loving people to march in lockstep with a police state. And in so doing, we have proven Osama bin Laden right. He warned that "[freedom and human rights in America are doomed](#). The U.S. government will lead the American people in — and the West in general — into an unbearable hell and a choking life."

It took a long time to clear away the rubble from the 9/11 attacks.

Yet as I make clear in my book [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#) and in its fictional counterpart [The Erik Blair Diaries](#), 22 years after the USA Patriot Act was unleashed on a vulnerable nation, we are still reeling from the destruction it has wrought on our freedoms.

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