



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on January 1, 2020

Facial Recognition Companies Driving Expansion of the Surveillance State

“The legality of any warrant by which a man may be deprived of his liberty, or disturbed in the enjoyment of his property, can not be too highly valued by a free people.” — St. George Tucker



At every level of government in the United States facial recognition is being embraced as a way to “protect” citizens and the infringement on constitutionally protected liberty is considered a worthwhile exchange for such increased “safety.”

Putting aside for a moment the fact that these cameras neither increase safety nor decrease crime, the proliferation of the devices is disconcerting to those who would prefer not to be constantly under the watch of wardens wearing uniforms or bureaucrats with agendas.

The dearth of concerted opposition to the installation of facial recognition apparatuses has left a vacuum into which the manufacturers of the technology have happily rushed, not only selling (or giving) the cameras and the software that empowers them to local governments and law enforcement agencies, but they’ve also seen the technology installed in every smartphone by nearly everybody in the world.

A recent article in *Politico* summarized the situation:

Tech industry leaders are meanwhile seizing on the opportunity to shape any global rules that may emerge. In December 2018, Microsoft President Brad Smith unveiled principles for facial recognition regulations in a rare call to action from a leading industry figure. Amazon Web Services’ public policy chief, Michael Punke, urged lawmakers to enact legislation that would both “protect civil rights while also allowing for continued innovation and practical application of the technology.”

For now, though, face-scanning tools are rapidly becoming commonplace, embraced by the public and private sector alike.

At the same time, companies like Facebook, Apple and Google have built facial recognition into their most popular devices, for instance as a means of unlocking phones or automatically tagging friends in photos. Amazon has emerged as a top supplier of easy-to-use facial recognition systems, whose customers have included police departments and U.S. government agencies.

Read through that list of locators: phones, tablets, computers, doorbells, and social media sites. The United States truly is becoming a 21st Century Panopticon and we are willingly building the walls ourselves!

The *Politico* piece also reports on government’s increasing appetite for keeping citizens under surveillance:



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Among public authorities, the appetite for facial recognition systems seems to know no bounds. Across the United States, federal, state and local agencies have been conducting so-called experiments for years, with the Transportation Security Administration and U.S. Customs and Border Protection both use facial recognition at select points of entry. On the state and local levels, police departments in Florida, Colorado and Oregon have begun to adopt the technology, with others exploring its use.

This is nothing new to readers of *The New American*. For a decade, I have been chronicling the crescendo of cries for increased surveillance in the name of increasing safety.

For example, here's a quote from a story we published in 2014 about the relationship of crime and facial recognition cameras:

Local leaders in Houston, like those in so many other cities across the country, have approved the installation of new surveillance cameras. These 180 new cameras bring to nearly 1,000 the number of known surveillance cameras in the country's fourth largest city.

The eye of the government will reportedly cover the city's "public areas around downtown, stadiums and the theater district."

Local CBS affiliate KHOU reports on its website that Houston police chief Charles McClelland believes the city needs the nearly 1,000 cameras to "provide necessary police coverage."

And just where did Houston get the money to buy these new cameras? There's no provision for the expense in the mayor's Fiscal Year 2014 budget, so the city's not paying for these "critical" services so necessary for the "safety" of its citizens. Department of Homeland Security to the rescue!

In the article announcing the deployment of the new devices, KHOU reports, "The city has spent more than \$18 million in federal money to build its camera system and has another \$5 million in reserve."

Perhaps citizens should overlook their elected leaders' acceptance of such federal largesse, given that the 900 or so surveillance cameras already in place have had such a favorable effect on crime rates in the city.

Not so much.

Again, from KHOU: "Officials say data is not kept to determine if the cameras are driving down crime."

If the cameras aren't being used to reduce crime, just what are they being used for?

"We also know from experience and from recent events that the government will inevitably abuse its use of personal information attained by spying on us. Houston needs to re-think and reject this proposal," Alehasem said in his press release.

Precisely. These cameras — thousands upon thousands attached to poles and buildings from coast to coast — are not about crime reduction, but about liberty reduction.

Residents of Evanston, Illinois, seem to see the surveillance that way, too.

Over 100 citizens of this Chicago suburb have signed petitions requesting that the city council publicize all the information regarding a proposal to add "3.7 miles of surveillance cameras" along city streets.



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Evanston's plan to expand its surveillance capabilities has a couple of things in common with the Houston program.

First, there is the lack of evidence that the cameras make residents safer. Consider this report published Wednesday in a local news blog:

Evanston resident Bobby Burns, who is collecting signatures online and in person in the neighborhood around the high school, told Patch he believes the city council does not have enough research to back up the surveillance camera proposal.

"If these cameras are really about student safety, there should be credible data that clearly supports the need," he wrote in an e-mail. "If this is about youth homicides, protecting senior citizens, or keeping an eye on police [officers], let's respect the importance of those issues and discuss them individually with care and consideration."

So, just like the cameras in Houston, the cameras in Evanston (population 75,430) don't seem to reduce crime or make anyone safer.

While there have been a handful of state and local lawmakers who have pushed back against the Panopticon — and even one or two federal legislators have called for restoration of the protections of the Fourth Amendment — the advocates of the surveillance state always fly the same flag: safety.

The question we must ask is: are we safer now than we were before we were under the never-blinking eye of government?

The next question we should ask is: what is being done with all that data?

For now, there seems to be very little oversight of the ever-expanding surveillance state. Soon, there will be cameras on every corner — they're already in every pocket — unless we decide to restore the constitutional barriers between our liberty and those who would take it from us.

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