Written by **Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.** on June 20, 2013

FBI's Mueller Admits Use of Drones in Domestic Surveillance

At a hearing of the Senate Judiciary Committee on Wednesday, FBI Director Robert Mueller (shown) testified that his agency has used drones to monitor American citizens within the United States. He qualified the admission by saying the unmanned aerial vehicles have been used in only a "very, very, minimal way."

During his testimony it seemed Mueller was almost coining words in order to dramatically downplay the use of drones in the FBI's domestic surveillance.

"And I will tell you that our footprint is very small. We have very few and of limited use and we're exploring not only the use but also the necessary guidelines for that use," he testified.

This is the first time that the FBI has admitted that it uses drones to keep an eye on citizens. The key word in that last sentence being "admitted."

"It's very seldom used and generally used in a particular incident when you need the capability," Mueller said. "It is very narrowly focused on particularized cases and particularized needs."

Some of those "particularized needs" were described in further detail by FBI spokesman Paul Bresson.

In his testimony, Bresson said that the bureau used a drone to support local law enforcement during the standoff and hostage situation in Alabama in January of this year.

As Bresson described the deployment, the drone was used then in a way typical of the "very limited circumstances" when the FBI can use them to support a "specific operational need." The drones, he added, "allow us to learn critical information that otherwise would be difficult to obtain without introducing serious risk to law enforcement personnel."

Judiciary Committee Chairwoman Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) compared the FBI's use of drones to the recent revelations of wholesale, dragnet telephone and Internet snooping by the National Security Agency (NSA). Feinstein's comparison, however, was not what civil libertarians and constitutionalists wanted to hear.

"If people are concerned about privacy, I think the greatest threat to the privacy of Americans is the drone … and the very few regulations that are on it today and the booming industry of commercial drones," Feinstein said.

Feinstein's statement is yet another perfect example of a politician floating a false dialectic in order to diminish the damage to liberty. By painting the problem as an either-or proposition, the NSA's electronic assault on the Constitution is downplayed by the FBI's admission of similar disregard of constitutional limitations on its power and of the Fourth Amendment.

The Fourth Amendment protects the "right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers,

and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures."

Furthermore, the Fourth Amendment also protects fundamental principles of justice by requiring that the government may only rely on warrants that are based "upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized."

While it is new, the FBI's admission of its use of drones to conduct unwarranted surveillance, the act of ignoring liberty and the Constitution that protects it is not novel.

As the documents released by Edward Snowden reveal, the NSA has just as little concern for constitutional limits on its power or the inalienability of certain fundamental rights.

What is perhaps most demonstrably damaging to the future of freedom in this Republic is the scope and sophistication of the panoply of surveillance technologies already in use by the surveillance apparatus whose activities are carried out in shadow.

For example, can you imagine a world where the Department of Homeland Security, the National Security Agency, the FBI, Interpol, Los Alamos National Laboratory, the U.S. military, and the state police forces of all 50 states combine to keep you under constant surveillance? Guess what — you're living in it.

Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) is currently sponsoring research designed "to invent new approaches to the identification of people, places, things and activities from still or moving defense and open-source imagery."

In an update on the progress being made, DARPA described several concepts being worked on by six teams of researchers chosen to live and labor in the "DARPA Innovation House," located somewhere near George Mason University in Virginia.

The first of the projects reportedly being cooked up in the DARPA test kitchens is called PetaVision. The DARPA statement describes PetaVision as one of the "Multi-Modal Approaches to Real-Time Video Analysis. Biologically-inspired, hierarchical neural networks to detect objects of interest in streaming video by combining texture/color, shape and motion/depth cues."

While that summary is admittedly vague, a website maintained by the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) provides a bit more information not only on the technology, but why the federal government might find it useful in its quest to place every American under constant surveillance and to identify potential "domestic terrorists":

> We seek to understand and implement the computational principles that enable high-level sensory processing and other forms of cognition in the human brain. To achieve these goals, we are creating synthetic cognition systems that emulate the functional architecture of the primate visual cortex. By using petascale computational resources, combined with our growing knowledge of the structure and function of biological neural systems, we can match, for the first time, the size and functional complexity necessary to reproduce the information processing capabilities of cortical circuits. The arrival of next generation supercomputers may allow us to close the performance gap between state of the art computer vision approaches by bringing these systems to the scale of the human brain.

The definition of "petascale" is important in order to better understand that statement.

Petascale is defined on Wikipedia as "a computer system capable of reaching performance in excess of

one petaflops, i.e. one quadrillion floating point operations per second." Such systems "will be used to do advanced computations in fields such as weather and climate simulation, nuclear simulations, cosmology, quantum chemistry, lower-level organism brain simulation, and fusion science."

Admittedly, the potential uses for PetaVision are obscured behind the scientific jargon used in its description. However, empowering the federal government with any technology that can simulate the human brain's ability to see and process information for the purpose of "detect[ing] objects of interest" in streaming video is terrifying.

The New American's reports on TrapWire published last year demonstrated, further, that it is very likely that the video feed from many of the traffic cameras, stoplight cameras, and similar devices may be monitored by agents of the federal government. If the ability of those agents to locate and follow a target increases, the ability of that target to evade detection logically decreases proportionally.

That is to say, once a person has been identified by the federal government as a potential threat, that person will be unable to seek refuge anywhere as emerging technology such as PetaVision will put every spot on the planet within the field of vision of the all-seeing, never-blinking eye of government.

Another tool being hammered out on the DARPA anvils is called Videovor. While no specific information on a technology with that name was found, a website offering scholarly journals covering the topic of visualization of video information was discovered.

On that website an abstract of an article written by scholars at the University of Wales, Swansea (U.K.), makes immediately apparent the attraction such work has for the domestic spying agencies of the federal government:

> Video data, generated by the entertainment industry, security and traffic cameras, video conferencing systems, video emails, and so on, is perhaps most time-consuming to process by human beings. In this paper, we present a novel methodology for "summarizing" video sequences using volume visualization techniques. We outline a system pipeline for capturing videos, extracting features, volume rendering video and feature data, and creating video visualization. We discuss a collection of image comparison metrics, including the linear dependence detector, for constructing "relative" and "absolute" difference volumes that represent the magnitude of variation between video frames. We describe the use of a few volume visualization techniques, including volume scene graphs and spatial transfer functions, for creating video visualization. In particular, we present a stream-based technique for processing and directly rendering video data in real time. With the aid of several examples, we demonstrate the effectiveness of using video visualization to convey meaningful information contained in video sequences.

Among the noteworthy revelations in this abstract is the fact that this technology will be used to render "video data in real time" and that the source of that video feed is to be provided by "security and traffic cameras, video conferencing systems, video emails, and so on."

Is it not reasonable to believe, in light of this rash of revelations, that such immensely powerful video summarizing technologies are already in use by the NSA and other federal snooping agencies whose employees are monitoring, recording, and storing the electronic communications of every American?

Furthermore, is there a better reason than the aggregation, recording, and storing of every word and electronic communication of every American for the set up of supercomputers at the NSA's sprawling complex under construction near Salt Lake City, Utah?

Keeping all of this in mind, Mueller's testimony is hardly remarkable.

What is more jarring is the fact that soon the Fourth Amendment protections against unreasonable searches and seizures will be obviated because the federal government will no longer need to "search" for things in the traditional sense of the word, as every place and every person will already be ever-present before its powerful eye and every law enforcement agency in the world will instantly have the images distributed by the supercomputers that gather them.

Photo of FBI Director Robert Mueller: AP Images

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