

# The Internet was a Technology of Freedom

by

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President Bush has claimed that monitoring the Internet backbones, in the US and abroad, is a limited activity. This is misleading: The Internet is designed so that all messages are converted into small, equal-sized packets of 0's and 1's. The packets are merged and intermingled with millions of other packets and speed along the huge superhighways of the Internet backbones as billions of anonymous flashes of light. At the National Security Agency, the first step is to capture, copy, and store these billions of anonymous flashes of light in electronic form. Next, computers must decode and analyze the original packets and messages that human analysts decide to read.

Thus, this is a bold extension of government power, at home and abroad. When it wiretaps the Internet backbones, the Bush-Cheney Administration is doing the legal equivalent of wiretapping everyone in the world, and opening and photographing everybody's mail, with the thin promise that no human being will search the databases unless a shift supervisor at the National Security Agency approves.

We are walking a dangerous path in world politics. The greatest risk of this new global

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surveillance system is the loss of America's power as a world leader. Seen from beyond the water's edge - and most of the people in the world *are* foreigners - the Bush-Cheney Administration has already created too many of the elements of a new image of a global police state. It has created a "knock on the door in the middle of the night" system of kidnaping ("renditions"), aircraft to transport captives across national boundaries to secret prisons where they are held *incommunicado*, torture. Now, add an American President's global police state surveillance system of the rest of the world's citizens (including citizens of the world's democracies and traditional American allies). Every child and teenager knows that this is how evil dictators and police states act. If America becomes, in the world's popular culture, Darth Vader, this will be inconsistent with President Bush's virtuous self-image and justified purposes. But there will be little that self-assured speeches from the White House can do to regain control.

The Internet has been widely seen as a technology of freedom and self-expression - one of the most exciting, healthy, and empowering contributions of America to the future. By perverting it into a system of global surveillance, the Bush-Cheney Administration has become an enemy of freedom. First, there will be a chilling and deterrent effect - when every student in the world knows that a visit to a Muslim or jihadist Website will be automatically logged in an NSA file. Then the seeds of rebellion will be planted. When, without warrants, King George's men searched the homes of American colonials to find evidence of enemies, they soon created a world in which his enemies numbered in the millions and their leaders signed their names boldly on public documents.