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**Keeping Watch:
How Government and Corporate America Track Us
Solidarity America
By John Funciello
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Oregon is considering taxing the number of miles we drive, rather than add a tax to each gallon of gasoline or diesel we buy, to pay for the construction and maintenance of the highway system.

That isn't the only state considering this approach, according to the Associated Press, which noted a few days ago that several states are considering doing the same. To many, it's a "so what?" moment and the effect on individual privacy is not a consideration.

Those transportation authorities who are considering this proposal are concerned that the mass purchase of fuel-efficient vehicles will not generate enough money through the gasoline tax to provide adequate maintenance for the highway system.

How do drivers pay this new tax? There are several ways, including reporting mileage when a car is registered or re-registered, or sold or junked. It seems that the odometer would become a kind of automobile black box for the road tax collectors.

Other ways include installation of a global positioning system (GPS) in each vehicle, so that the travel of the car can be tracked electronically. This would require the installation of receivers and recorders along the nation's entire highway system, so it may be a while before there's enough time or money to accomplish that.

If you think that can't be done, think of the ways that our movements and purchases are tracked already: credit card purchases, the so-called discount cards that supermarkets and drug stores hand out, electronic passes for toll highways, and the list continues.

Last year, in a speech on another topic, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick casually mentioned elimination of all toll roads and replacing the entire toll structure with something that would track every vehicle and charge for the mileage.

It's the same idea as Oregon's, but the governor wasn't talking about transportation in that speech. He just mentioned it, and he didn't explain how his system might work. He simply said that the technology exists to make such a system work.

The only way that Patrick's system would work is to have some kind of transmitter installed in each vehicle and have most roads - crossroads, at least - equipped with receivers and recording devices.

The information would be transmitted to a central database and would sit there until the time to send out the tax bills (annually, quarterly, or monthly?). Without saying as much, along the way, the central authority likely would be able to determine where you drove on a particular day, how long you were there, and where you went later.

Now, that's surveillance! But, we're not done.

This is not just an urban or suburban consideration. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has come up with a surveillance system of its own, called the National Animal Identification System (NAIS), which would track every head of livestock on every farm in America.

Within that system, the farmer would have to mark every animal - cow, horse, sheep, goat, chicken, duck, goose, or any other livestock - and report its whereabouts to the central database. If an animal is sold, that's reported. If an animal dies, that's reported. If a farmer buys an animal and brings it to the farm, that's reported. If you take a ride on your horse down the road, that's reported. Under the rules, if a chicken is eaten for dinner, that's reported.

Oddly, there is an exception made for industrial food operations. They can use just a single number, if they're producing, say, 500,000 chickens or 5,000 beef cows, or 10,000 hogs. But the family farmer has to comply with a mark and record-keeping on every single animal.

The requirements are onerous and will be costly in time and money. Many small livestock farmers are simply deciding not to put up with the system - they're quitting. That eliminates competition for the industrial food producers. To them, that's a benefit and it could be one of the reasons they demanded that USDA create NAIS.

USDA did this without any apparent Congressional oversight. They certainly did not consult the family farmers of America, who would have rejected it out of hand. They already comply with other systems that track animal diseases. And, food safety, generally, starts at the slaughterhouse for meat and in the packing house for fruits and

vegetables.

Fifty state agriculture departments are doing the same thing, claiming all the time that it is a voluntary system, but doing everything in their power to make it effectively mandatory. It's an example of bureaucracy gone wild, but the genesis of the system is reported to have been the demand of some of the largest, most powerful agribusinesses in the world.

This is but one kind of mass surveillance over which the democratic institutions of America appear to have no control.

Black farmers across the south were losing their farms at three times the rate of all farmers, during the massive farm foreclosures of the 1980s. It will be even more difficult for them to stay on the land with such demanding and intrusive systems such as NAIS.

With just a slight bit of reflection, one can imagine why the time-and-motion study men were so reviled in the early factories of the Industrial Revolution.

It's true that the factory workers were in one place, rather than spread out on the national road system or on farms all across the country, but the effect and intent were the same - control of the workplace and control of the workers.

The proposed changes that the time-and-motion men (and most were men) came up with literally attempted to remove any human interaction from the workplace. They dehumanized the places by encouraging the factory owners to view their workers as parts of the machinery (if you keep them from talking to one another, they'll be more productive).

So, too, are the current proposals to track human beings and their activities. Ultimately, it's about control. Felons who are wearing electronic bracelets will have nothing on the average driver or citizen or farmer. Whatever they do, someone can track them, and the record doesn't go away. With our amazing technology, the information can remain "on file" for a very long time.

Americans want a clean environment. They want pure food and water. They want a transportation system that doesn't further degrade the environment. They want decent housing for all. They want good schools for every child and health care for every person. There are ways to achieve the goals of society within a democratic structure. It's simple: the people have to be involved. When they're not, it's easy for an authoritarian individual or group to gain power, and then, the abuses begin.

Most of the time, the government and Corporate America (which work usually hand-in-hand) signal what they intend to do. We just have to read the signs and act accordingly. In family farm terms, they're putting up the fence and just waiting to hook up the electricity.

Right now, they're telling us that they're readying us for the personal surveillance society, inside a national security state. This still is a democracy, to the extent we participate in it. Our constitutional rights to freedom and privacy are further endangered by these proposals and the systems that already are in place. It's time to

act.


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The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog

BlackCommentator.com Columnist, John Funciello, is a labor organizer and former union organizer. His union work started when he became a local president of The Newspaper Guild in the early 1970s. He was a reporter for 14 years for newspapers in New York State. In addition to labor work, he is organizing family farmers as they struggle to stay on the land under enormous pressure from factory food producers and land developers. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Funciello.

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