

**A Nation of Snitches**

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By Chris Hedges



*A Transportation Security Administration sign at Los Angeles’ main rail terminal, Union Station, urges that suspicious activities be reported to authorities. It declares, “If You See Something Say Something.” (AP / Damian Dovarganes)*

A totalitarian state is only as strong as its informants. And the United States has a lot of them. They read our emails. They listen to, download and store our phone calls. They photograph us on street corners, on subway platforms, in stores, on highways and in public and private buildings. They track us through our electronic devices. They infiltrate our organizations. They entice and facilitate “acts of terrorism” by Muslims, radical environmentalists, activists and [Black Bloc](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_cancer_of_occupy_20120206%20) anarchists, framing these hapless dissidents and sending them off to prison for years. They have amassed detailed profiles of our habits, our tastes, our peculiar proclivities, our medical and financial records, our sexual orientations, our employment histories, our shopping habits and our criminal records. They store this information in government computers. It sits there, waiting like a time bomb, for the moment when the state decides to criminalize us.

Totalitarian states record even the most banal of our activities so that when it comes time to lock us up they can invest these activities with subversive or criminal intent. And citizens who know, because of the courage of Edward Snowden, that they are being watched but naively believe they “have done nothing wrong” do not grasp this dark and terrifying logic.

Tyranny is always welded together by subterranean networks of informants. These informants keep a populace in a state of fear. They perpetuate constant anxiety and enforce isolation through distrust. The state uses wholesale surveillance and spying to break down trust and deny us the privacy to think and speak freely.

A state security and surveillance apparatus, at the same time, conditions all citizens to become informants. In airports and train, subway and bus stations the recruitment campaign is relentless. We are fed lurid government videos and other messages warning us to be vigilant and report anything suspicious. The videos, on endless loops broadcast through mounted television screens, have the prerequisite ominous music, the shady-looking criminal types, the alert citizen calling the authorities and in some cases the apprehended evildoer being led away in handcuffs. The message to be hypervigilant and help the state ferret out dangerous internal enemies is at the same time disseminated throughout government agencies, the mass media, the press and the entertainment industry.

“If you see something say something,” goes the chorus.

In any Amtrak station, waiting passengers are told to tell authorities—some of whom often can be found walking among us with dogs—about anyone who “looks like they are in an unauthorized area,” who is “loitering, staring or watching employees and customers,” who is “expressing an unusual level of interest in operations, equipment, and personnel,” who is “dressed inappropriately for the weather conditions, such as a bulky coat in summer,” who “is acting extremely nervous or anxious,” who is “restricting an individual’s freedom of movement” or who is “being coached on what to say to law enforcement or immigration officials.”

What is especially disturbing about this constant call to become a citizen informant is that it directs our eyes away from what we should see—the death of our democracy, the growing presence and omnipotence of the police state, and the evisceration, in the name of our security, of our most basic civil liberties.

Manufactured fear engenders self-doubt. It makes us, often unconsciously, conform in our outward and inward behavior. It conditions us to relate to those around us with suspicion. It destroys the possibility of organizing, community and dissent. We have built what [Robert Gellately](https://www.fsu.edu/profiles/gellately/%20) calls a “culture of denunciation.”

Snitches in prisons, the quintessential totalitarian system, are the glue that allows prison authorities to maintain control and keep prisoners divided and weak. Snitches also populate the courts, where the police make secret deals to drop or mitigate charges against them in exchange for their selling out individuals targeted by the state. Our prisons are filled with people serving long sentences based on false statements that informants provided in exchange for leniency.

There are no rules in this dirty game. Police, like prison officials, can offer snitches deals that lack judicial oversight or control. (Deals sometimes involve something as trivial as allowing a prisoner access to food like cheeseburgers.) Snitches allow the state to skirt what is left of our legal protections. Snitches can obtain information for the authorities and do not have to give their targets a [Miranda warning](http://www.mirandawarning.org/). And because of the desperation of most who are recruited to snitch, informants will do almost anything asked of them by authorities.

Just as infected as the prisons and the courts are poor neighborhoods, which abound with snitches, many of them low-level drug dealers allowed to sell on the streets in exchange for information. And from there our culture of snitches spirals upward into the headquarters of the National Security Agency, Homeland Security and the FBI.

Systems of police and military authority are ruthless when their own, such as Edward Snowden or Chelsea Manning, become informants on behalf of the common good. The power structure imposes walls of silence and harsh forms of retribution within its ranks in an effort to make sure no one speaks. Power understands that once it is divided, once those inside its walls become snitches, it becomes as weak and vulnerable as those it subjugates.

We will not be able to reclaim our democracy and free ourselves from tyranny until the informants and the vast networks that sustain them are banished. As long as we are watched 24 hours a day we cannot use the word “liberty.” This is the relationship of a master and a slave. Any prisoner understands this.

[Alexander Solzhenitsyn](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1970/solzhenitsyn-bio.html%20) in his masterpiece “The Gulag Archipelago,” which chronicles his time in Josef Stalin’s gulags and is a brilliant reflection of the nature of oppression and tyranny, describes a moment when an influx of western Ukrainians who had been soldiers during World War II arrived at his camp, at Ekibastuz. The Ukrainians, he wrote, “were horrified by the apathy and slavery they saw, and reached for their knives.” They began to murder the informants.

Solzhenitsyn continued:

“Kill the stoolie!” That was it, the vital link! A knife in the heart of the stoolie! Make knives and cut the stoolie’s throats—that was it!

Now as I write this chapter, rows of humane books frown down at me from the walls, the tarnished gilt on their well-worn spines glinting reproachfully like stars through the cloud. Nothing in the world should be sought through violence! By taking up the sword, the knife, the rifle, we quickly put ourselves on the level of tormentors and persecutors. And there will be no end to it. …

There will be no end. … Here, at my desk, in a warm place, I agree completely.

If you ever get twenty-five years for nothing, if you find yourself wearing four number patches on your clothes, holding your hands permanently behind your back, submitting to searches morning and evening, working until you are utterly exhausted, dragged into the cooler whenever someone denounces you, trodden deeper and deeper into the ground—from the hole you’re in, the fine words of the great humanists will sound like the chatter of the well-fed and free.

There will be no end of it! ... But will there be a beginning? Will there be a ray of hope in our lives or not?

The oppressed at least concluded that evil cannot be cast out by good.

The eradication of some snitches and intimidation of others transformed the camp. It was, Solzhenitsyn admits, an imperfect justice since there was no “documentary confirmation that a man was an informer.” But, he noted, even this “improperly constituted, illegal, and invisible court was much more acute in its judgments, much less often mistaken, than any of the tribunals, panels of three, courts-martial, or Special Boards with which we are familiar.”

“Of the five thousand men about a dozen were killed, but with every stroke of the knife more and more of the clinging, twining tentacles fell away,” he wrote. “A remarkable fresh breeze was blowing! On the surface we were prisoners living in a camp just as before, but in reality we had become free—free because for the very first time in our lives we had started saying openly and aloud all that we thought! No one who has not experienced this transition can imagine what it is like!

And the informers … stopped informing.”

The camp bosses, he wrote “were suddenly blind and deaf. To all appearances, the tubby major, his equally tubby second in command, Captain Prokofiev, and all the wardens walked freely about the camp, where nothing threatened them; moved among us, watched us—and yet saw nothing! Because a man in uniform sees and hears nothing without stoolies.”

The system of internal control in the camp broke down. Prisoners no longer would serve as foremen on work details. Prisoners organized their own self-governing council. Guards began to move about the camp in fear and no longer treated prisoners like cattle. Pilfering and theft among prisoners stopped. “The old camp mentality—you die first, I’ll wait a bit; there is no justice so forget it; that’s the way it was, and that’s the way it will be—also began to disappear.”

Solzhenitsyn concluded this chapter, “Behind the Wire the Ground Is Burning,” in Volume 3 of his book, with this reflection.

Purged of human filth, delivered from spies and eavesdroppers we looked about and saw, wide-eyed that … we were thousands! That we were … *politicals!* That we could *resist!*

We had chosen well; the chain would snap if we tugged at this link—the stoolies, the talebearers and traitors! Our own kind had made our lives impossible. As on some ancient sacrificial altar, their blood had been shed that we might be freed from the curse that hung over us.

The revolution was gathering strength. The wind that seemed to have subsided had sprung up again in a hurricane to fill our eager lungs.

Later in the book Solzhenitsyn would write, “Our little island had experienced an earthquake—and ceased to belong to the Archipelago.”

Freedom demands the destruction of the security and surveillance organs and the disempowering of the millions of informants who work for the state. This is not a call to murder our own stoolies—although some of the 2.3 million prisoners in cages in America’s own gulags would perhaps rightly accuse me of writing this from a position of privilege and comfort and not understanding the brutal dynamics of oppression – but instead to accept that unless these informants on the streets, in the prisons and manning our massive, government data-collection centers are disarmed we will never achieve liberty. I do not have quick and simple suggestions for how this is to be accomplished. But I know it must.

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