

The US government is worried about "the enemy within." The 9/11 attackers were able to communicate with each other and to undertake their pre-attack activities without the US government stopping them. Not that they weren't detected. Suspicious activity was reported locally by the FBI, but the information didn't trigger any alarms. The Boston bombers and other home grown attackers have been able to access jihadist material through the internet. People who are liable to radicalisation tend to visit known web-sites. Prism is one way of enabling US government agencies to detect the enemy within. Nick Watts, Deputy Director General of the UK Defence Forum, puts the current furore into context.

The American people are worried about their government. They have been conditioned by their history to see Government as the problem, not the solution as many in Europe do. The prevalence of gun ownership is, among other things, a reaction against the threat from an over mighty government. The US constitution enshrines the right to free speech in the first amendment; the right to bear arms in the second amendment. The rights of the people against "unreasonable searches and seizures" are also enshrined in the fourth amendment.

The collision of these two concerns, as highlighted in recent whistle blowing revelations comes as private Bradley Manning the US soldier behind the Wikileaks revelations stands trial. The conflict between the wish of the American people and their government's wish to protect the country poses a thorny problem for the Obama administration. The fact that technology now allows government agencies to gather communications information on a large scale means that it ought to be possible to prevent another 9/11 attack, or another Boston style bombing. But this would mean having enough data to establish what intelligence analysts call "pattern of life" i.e. what does John Doe normally do? Who are his friends, what web-sites does he visit?

Such surveillance is normally undertaken once someone comes to the attention of law enforcement or security services. In the US there is a constant tension between those who call for protection against terrorists and the first amendment lobby. The problem that US agencies and their British counterparts have to deal with, however, is that terrorism is a global phenomenon. Jihadists in Yemen or elsewhere seek to attack western "crusaders" in their own lands. The recent Woolwich attack was an example of how this phenomenon can manifest itself amongst us. When computers are seized it becomes apparent how much jihadist material has been viewed by the perpetrators of some of these attacks; or attempted attacks which have been foiled.

There is, then, an open and shut security case for the surveillance of potential terrorists or their supporters and those who encourage them. Speaking in the House of Commons the Foreign Secretary referring to any GCHQ involvement in the Prism programme took the line that where citizens have done no wrong they have no reason to fear from any government surveillance. Indeed most people are happy to push their private lives and personal data into cyber space via social networks or through on-line shopping services. All part of modern life.

The civil liberties argument in the UK is that of collusion between the US agency the National Security Agency (NSA) and Government Communications Head Quarters (GCHQ) its British equivalent. This suspicion is triggered by allegations of collusion between British intelligence agencies and their US counterparts in the rendition and torture of British passport holders. It is easy to see a read across from one agency relationship to another.

William Hague's assertion that no laws were broken conceals a wider worry among UK security figures, following the dropping of the Communications Data Bill. This legislation would enable the security services to undertake the sort of activity which NSA is now doing. Technology is advancing at such a pace that it is becoming increasingly difficult for agencies to keep track of communications between terrorist suspects or criminals.

The UK and the US have long shared intelligence and communications data. This lies at the heart of the "special" relationship. There is a UK component permanently embedded in the HQ of the NSA at Fort Meade in Maryland which is the home of the NSA. The UK is without doubt the junior partner, but security sources say that the UK adds value to the US efforts. This often consists of the use by US agencies of UK dependencies in strategic locations around the globe such as Gibraltar or Cyprus.

It is possible that UK agencies asked their US counterparts for information on UK citizens, which they have been unable to access themselves. These people might be in Kenya looking to go to Somalia or in the Middle East, or in Pakistan. The UK government says that no laws have been broken. But ministers and security personnel are increasingly worried that terrorists and criminals may soon be able to "go dark" i.e. to disappear off the radar – and the result will be another 9/11.