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Cashing in privacy for security is a perilous path

From Mr Daniel J Aronoff.

Sir, Paul Foster's acquiescence (Letters, June 10) in allowing government security services to abrogate his personal privacy by reading his emails and listening to his voicemails is chilling. His statement that "they will find my mail very mundane and quickly move on to others with more interesting profiles" reminds of Václav Havel's iconic greengrocer who, in order to survive communist totalitarian oppression, placed a sign in front of his store proclaiming "Workers of the World Unite", which neither the greengrocer, nor anyone else, believed in (*The Power of the Powerless*, 1978). But it was, by enforcing universal conformity in a mundane, seemingly trivial matter, a vital part of the "panorama" of conformity that the system required to stamp out independent thought.

Because "communism was the perverse extreme" of tendencies prevalent in western culture, Havel saw life under communism as "a kind of warning to the west, revealing to it its own latent tendencies". But the west, in his view, had failed to heed the warning and displayed an "unwillingness to hear the warning voices coming from our part of the world".

Mr Foster does not seem to comprehend that the authority to invade his privacy, which he is so casually willing to cast off for a bit more security, is the very lever that has enabled totalitarian regimes to oppress, and is therefore the very thing that freedom-loving people struggled to vanquish. The belief that it is somehow safe to forfeit liberties so long as the government is democratically elected is a dangerous illusion that was not suffered by the US founding fathers, who enshrined the protection of liberty, property and privacy into the Bill of Rights. The founding fathers knew that even the power of a democratically elected government needed to be constrained, since "men are not angels"; and they would have agreed with the often-quoted contention that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

If we in the west are as willing as is Mr Foster to cash in our individual rights for security, then we shall not long remain free, and perhaps we shall no longer deserve the blessing of freedom. The price of liberty, as has been noted, is eternal vigilance.

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