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*Willing Accomplices*

## The NSA's Corporate Collaborators

by BILL BLUNDEN

Emails published by Al Jazeera America, in addition to showing hi-tech executives and senior intelligence officials interacting on a casual first-name basis, reference a government program referred to as the *Enduring Security Framework* (ESF) [1]. An NPR piece on the ESF back in 2012 offers a nutshell summary of what this initiative is all about [2]:

*“For each session, the CEOs get special, top-secret clearances so they can be told about the latest in cyberweaponry. They can then go back to their companies and take steps to deal with the threats they hear about, threats they may not previously have taken seriously. In the words of one government participant: We scare the bejeezus out of them”*

This description reinforces the notion that the big bad NSA somehow coerced hi-tech companies into collaboration. Since Ed Snowden's documents have trickled out into public view companies like Google have tried to distance themselves from the NSA [3], to make public displays of anger [4], to create the impression that they were somehow strong-armed into helping government spies [5] and that they've been working to bolster their security against the NSA's prying eyes [6]. Above all hi-tech companies want to look like they're siding with their users [7].

These gestures are likely theater, being performed by executives on behalf of quarterly earnings. Such is the beauty of PR. Hi-tech companies don't *really* need to fend off government spies but merely provide users with the *perception* of resistance.

Keep in mind that social media survives by selling user data. Spying is their business model. In padding their bottom lines executives have worked diligently to dilute privacy legislation [8] in addition to garnering a myriad of fines [9]. All of this data harvesting services a data broker industry which generates something in the neighborhood of \$200 billion in revenue annually [10].

Those who resist government pressure like Nicholas Merrill, who was running an Internet service provider in New York called Calyx, and Ladar Levison, the former owner of Lavabit, are rare exceptions to the rule. For the big multinationals too much money is at stake to let something like civil liberties get in the way. Google's Larry Page opines that [11]:

*“There's many, many exciting and important things you could do that you just can't do because they're illegal or they're not allowed by regulation”*

Though the *Washington Post* may imply otherwise [12], in reality as far as the National Security State is concerned there is very little dividing line between the public sector and the private sector. According to Heidi Boghosian, the executive director of the National Lawyers Guild [13]:

*“People need to know that for all intents and purposes, the distinction right now between government and the corporate world is virtually nil. They are hand-in-hand working to gather information about*

*Americans as well as people across the globe, to really be in a race to collect more information than any other country can, because I think in their eyes, having this information, storing it, and being able to access it for years on end is a symbol of power and control. So that you can't really make that distinction anymore between big business and government."*

Glenn Greenwald echoed this point after the Polk Award ceremony [14]:

*"There almost is no division between the private sector and the NSA, or the private sector and the Pentagon, when it comes to the American national security state. They really are essentially one."*

Despite Eric Schmidt's vocal tirade over NSA spying [15], Google is linked tightly with the elements of the defense industry (e.g. SAIC, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and Blackbird) [16] and is no stranger to covert cooperation with the U.S. government. For example, in an e-mailed published by WikiLeaks Fred Burton, a former State Department official and a VP at Stratfor, described the director of Google Ideas, Jared Cohen, as involved in secret missions near the Iranian border with the support of the White House and the State Department [17]. Ostensibly Burton heard this from Eric Schmidt.

When a provider like Amazon is awarded a \$600 million 10-year contract to provide the CIA with cloud services [18] do you suppose that Amazon is inclined to cater to government requests? Think of it this way: Roughly 70% of the intelligence budget goes to the private sector [19]. There are incentives for executives to go along.

Years ago the banking industry single-handedly used its resources to push through the Gramm–Leach–Bliley Act, effectively repealing the protections of Glass–Steagall, in addition to deregulating the market for derivatives with the Commodity Futures Modernization Act of 2000. If the moneyed elite don't like certain laws, in the absence of a strong countervailing public opinion, they have the means to impose change. Their influence isn't total but history has shown that it's often sufficient.

Yahoo has been known to help Chinese officials identify citizens who make critical remarks about the Chinese government [20]. According to news reports from overseas, Microsoft has redesigned Skype so that government security forces in countries like Russia can tap into and monitor Skype traffic [21]. Companies like Microsoft (sitting on 60 billion in cash [22]) or Apple (sitting on \$147 billion in cash [23]) aren't exactly defenseless. Corporate spies choose to collaborate with government spies because the benefits outweigh the negative consequences.

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