

Secrets—A cautionary tale

By Jim Nowlan

“There’s something addictive about a secret,” declared J. Edgar Hoover, the founding director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who died in 1972. And so it is with the National Security Agency (NSA), which is now apparently storing just about every digital impulse that we Americans emit.

I fear that our democracy runs the risk of becoming overtaken by an “all-knowing” oligarchy of men and women in Washington who could use the power of information to chill and control our behavior.

There are steps we can take to try to prevent this, though I am far from the best to know what they should be.

Many Americans appear blasé about the recent revelations that the National Security Agency scoops all our phone and email records into a humongous data bank.

“I haven’t done anything wrong, so why should I care?” bleats the chorus of innocents.

Let me tell you the tale of a man many consider a great American, but who succumbed to the intoxicating power of secrets.

FBI director J. Edgar Hoover reached into the lives, even the bedrooms, of thousands of Americans and spread fear among the highest in our land, even presidents, who feared firing him, as they longed to do.

From 1924 until his death almost 50 years later, Hoover created and shaped the FBI. A man of apparent rectitude who once planned to become a Presbyterian minister, Hoover learned

quickly that the power of information could be used to destroy the careers and lives of his enemies.

Hoover used the FBI to amass detailed secret files on every member of Congress, presidents, and even their wives, as well as on thousands of prominent persons and anyone who ever criticized him. Hoover had a penchant for seeking out sexual indiscretions, which he used to blackmail opponents into submission.

Hoover was a vindictive hater, and he hated Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin Roosevelt. Hoover bugged and watched the New York City apartment of Mrs. Roosevelt. The FBI filled a dossier with innuendo and leaked rumors, never proved, that the President's first lady carried on illicit affairs with men and women.

The FBI director also hated the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. In his quest to destroy King, the FBI broke into his headquarters at least 20 times, tapped his phone lines for years and bugged his hotel rooms. Only King's assassination brought Hoover's vicious quest to an end.

President Harry Truman, a president who stood up to this appointed bureaucrat, feared the FBI was in the late 1940s becoming a Gestapo or secret police.

Here was abuse of power on a colossal scale by a man many Americans place in the pantheon of heroes. Think about what power-intoxicated investigators could do today with all the digital information Hoover could not have dreamed of.

And we are about to enter the era of tiny drone aircraft, which adds another layer of intrusion into our lives.

When it comes to power—and information is power—I think we should think the worst of people who control it.

The challenge is to find a balance, on the one hand, between the need today to pursue an amorphous terrorist enemy that fights a borderless conflict, is among us, and is indiscriminate in its targets.

On the other hand, we must back up the 4th Amendment to our national Constitution. The protections therein seem crystal clear to me, although the wholesale amassing of digital information about all of us by the NSA appears to be violating the amendment with impunity:

"The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized."

I think we should pursue a couple of courses:

- Hold a national conversation about intelligence gathering in the 21st Century and the protections of our venerable 18th Century American Constitution.
- Create an Inspector General of Intelligence, which office would oversee the scores of intelligence gathering agencies of our national government to see that the 4th Amendment is being upheld. The model might be the General Accounting Office, a congressional office that oversees the management of the executive branch.

If an otherwise good man like Hoover could abuse the power of information with reckless abandon, we must be on guard toward all others who could intrude deeply into our most intimate privacy. After all, secrets are addictive.