

Annoyances increase with surveillance

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—March usually shapes up as an annoying month. Winter always saves a big snow for late March. This last pile-it-on dump is an act of low-down meanness, because it always follows a perfect, sunny, 60-degree day.

I'm annoyed when winter follows spring. Muggers should not lie in wait just around a pleasant corner.

March winds are annoying, because they rip through the chimes on the front porch, causing a bedlam that dwarfs The Beatles' 1959 concert in Blue Grass when they played ukuleles and bongos to a sell-out crowd of 17 while wearing plaid pedal pushers.

Well, maybe it wasn't *those* Beatles. It's doubly annoying when memory slips in an effort to validate a current annoyance.

I'm pretty sure it was some insect group. The Emerald Ash Borers? Or Frankie Valli and The Woolly Adelgids? It's bugging me that I can't remember.

March is also the self-imposed finish line for an IRS 1040 itemizer like me. I've been collecting annoying statements and records, sorting annoying receipts, toting up annoying numbers and organizing annoying accounts for our half-dozen, self-employment businesses since mid-January.

The point is to pile up every legal way to nick off as many business-expense dollars as possible from our gross income. The lower our adjusted gross income, the less tax we will pay.

I spend days, not just hours, during the first three months of the year doing this tax work so that I can send the whole annoying but-now-translatable mess to a competent tax accountant to recast into our tax return.

If I were a judge dealing with unrepentant criminals, I would sentence them to long terms calculating the Alternative Minimum Tax for their fellow citizens. Tax annoyance as punishment.

What if all Americans were required to itemize, to collect and organize hundreds, even thousands, of receipts every year? We would, I bet, be so annoyed that we would march on Washington armed with improvised exploding calculators and Molotov cocktails made from Liquid Paper demanding a simplified tax system.

I've also been annoyed over the last few days, because I continue to be bumfuzzled by the Big Bang Theory, which argues that all matter in the universe was created from nothing more than super-compressed energy.

The Periodic Table now contains 118 elements, of which the first 98 occur naturally. How could an explosion or an inflation -- two versions of the Big Bang -- produce 98 pure elements from no precursor materials? How could it produce elements that are as different as gold and oxygen, as carbon is from mercury or lead? It's annoying to be unable to figure out where stuff came from.

March has another annoying feature—the command that I set all my clocks ahead one hour in anticipation of setting them back by the same hour in the fall. Hey! If saving daylight is so great for one hour, then why don't we jump ahead three or four at a time?

My most serious annoyance this March has been the realization that America is becoming a total surveillance state.

My movements -- called “geolocation data” -- can be tracked through my cellphone and a black box in my vehicle, as well as by embedded cameras in streetlights. I can be observed by satellite and increasingly by drones. All my digital data for the last decade has been recorded and stored. My e-mails can be read; my phone conversations listened to; my Internet searches followed.

In 20 years, maybe fewer, cameras will be in our homes, vehicles and communities whether we like it or not. All records -- finances, credit cards, health, employment, education, reading material, correspondence, gun ownership, political contributions and social-media interactions -- could be in the hands of federal authorities without probable cause or search warrants, if they're not already. We may be continuously tracked and our actions monitored through chips in cards we are required to carry.

The surveillance state is being fastened on to Americans by public employees, in secret, in technology-driven increments one step at a time, in a bipartisan manner and with the best of intentions.

Its justification is fear of terrorism. But not many ask whether the response of a surveillance state is proportional to the threat.

In 2011, the U.S. State Department reported 17 American citizens were killed worldwide from terrorist attacks. (Most recent data are available at www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2011/195556.htm.)

Data from 2010 show that 42,000 American citizens died from poisoning, 34,000 in vehicle accidents, 32,000 from firearms, 27,000 in falls, 41,000 from drugs and 26,000 from alcohol. You were more likely to be

killed by having one of your household appliances fall on you than from a terrorist.

Citizens become aware of the scope and intrusiveness of surveillance only after an insider spills some of the beans.

The Snowden documents printed in The Washington Post last year show that we are spending more than \$16 billion annually on counter-terrorism out of a total intelligence budget of more than \$52 billion. (www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/national/black-budget)

Take as one point of comparison the 42,000 American deaths from poisoning. The federal government spends about \$17 million annually to partially fund the national poison center system, whose budget has been cut in recent years. Forty-two thousand deaths from poison vs. 17 from terrorists. The War on Poisoning spends about 0.00106 percent of our anti-terrorism expenditure.

It's easy to accept the surveillance state, because it's so hidden in the background. It's easy to buy the rationale that comprehensive spying on ourselves is the vigilance we must endure to be secure against terrorists. It's easy to undervalue protections against the overreaching and abuse of these tools.

I favor targeted surveillance when there's cause. But the current level of domestic surveillance is way more than is needed to keep us reasonably safe from a terrorist with a bomb in his underpants and even suicidal wackos in a hijacked airplane. Republicans and Democrats should be able to agree on this point.

So let's see how good our surveillance is.

Let me confess. I am a terrorist. My real name is Hummus al-Dopa. To my fellow jihadists, I'm known as The Big Bad Wolf.

I'm planning to huff and puff and blow down the National Security Agency's headquarters pretty soon. (I'm building up my wind at the gym each morning.)

You think I'm kidding around.

In October, 1967, I levitated the Pentagon. We had a permit to raise it up to three feet off the ground—this is true.

This anti-War protest originally requested permission to lift the Pentagon 300 feet high. But sell-out protest leaders agreed to a paltry three-foot limit with the authorities. This allowed the War to drag on for another five years. I was willing to settle at 150 feet but not an inch less.

We got the building up a good 12 inches when agents provocateurs disguised as college students, five-star generals and hula girls deflated our

Zenny forcefield by passing around plates of spiked brownies. Bill Clinton and I didn't consume.

Ben Bradley of The Washington Post, among others, refused to run a photo showing Pentagon lift off. He told me the Post had a policy of not worrying the public with pictures of UFOs involving local landmarks.

This personal anecdote proves that I've had an anti-edifice complex for decades.

I am an American citizen, but I have been trained in a foreign land by a terrorist organization, known among Western infidels as, All Kaflooie.

My goal is to gather all good Muslims into the Eighth Century where men were men and women were forbidden to shop outside the home. We believe that all bad Muslims should be sentenced either to dying by fire ants or calculating the Alternative Minimum Tax for the rest of their lives. I believe all bad Muslims have no right to choose.

And, if by chance, I fail to blow the NSA down in one breath, I will light my pants on fire -- after taking them off, of course -- as an act of conscience. You can arrest me for nonviolent exposure.

And for the record. I am solely responsible for the content of this confession. My wife knows nothing about my plot, not even the one I'm writing.

Now let's see how good the multi-billion dollar surveillance systems are.

If this is my last column, you'll know I've been hustled off to Gitmo where I'm being forced to watch reruns of "The Jerry Springer Show" 24 hours a day. Since I've already confessed, I don't know what more I can add to the government's case against me.

But maybe I'm going about this wrong.

Instead of trying to blow down NSA headquarters, maybe I should just levitate them 150 feet off the ground.

If I succeed, I'm sure the NSA will offer me a long-term, multi-million dollar, sole-source contract to levitate buildings around the world, starting with the Kremlin and Vladimir, The Annexer.

I think it's time for me to be less annoyed and more angry over domestic surveillance and where it's heading.

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