Liberty and Security

During the Civil War, Lincoln made the monumental decision to suspend Habeas Corpus in order to greater protect the nation. Today, government still faces this fundamental question as whether to suspend liberty for security. However, the answer to this question may lie within the minds of the founding fathers. It was Benjamin Franklin who is quoted as saying, “[t]hose who would trade liberty for security deserve neither.” Thus, security must give way to liberty.

The balance of the security of a free state with protection of rights is often the subject of public scrutiny. In times of peace and absence of external threats, the United States is able to secure both the rights of the people and their protection. The issue arises when either foreign or domestic factors threaten this security. In these times, some people believe it reasonable to suspend liberty (and other rights) in order to ensure the security of themselves and their property. Many may even convince themselves that suspension of these rights will only be temporary and inconsistent, or if the government oversteps this expanded authority the population can simply use to tools of the Republic and vote out the government officials. Other citizens may agree to the suspension of some rights while declaring others unalienable. Surely, some citizens would, under no circumstance, be willing to give up their right to free speech or due process, which allow them to speak out against the government and protects them from unjustified imprisonment. And, as seen in current debate, others may hold the position that the ultimate guarantee of all rights is the Second Amendment’s right to bear arms, and refuse to part with it.

But the question still remains as to other rights. With the modern use of technology and specifically information systems, government faces the problem of securing our information while guarding our rights against unreasonable searches and seizures. Even the most adamant of constitutionalists would admit that granting the government the ability to view every person’s internet usage would go a long way in protecting our information systems from outside threats. At the same time, this also gives government access to a lot of private information citizens may not want the government to know about like medical history, political views, and business strategy. In determining the answer to this puzzle, it helps to look at the framers’ own views of security and liberty. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson clearly states that the purpose of government is to secure the rights of the people. His philosophy is silent on the idea that government exists to protect us from external threats. Keeping in the mindset of Jefferson and Franklin, liberty should never take a backseat to security. No one denies the importance of protecting our information systems, but if the country must fundamentally change to protect itself, then what are we really protecting? Arguing the opposite is arguing nothing more than “we must change America in order to save America.” `