Throughout history, governments have been restricting freedom under the guise of providing security and stability to civilizations. The individual freedoms that some of us currently enjoy is a relatively new concept when one considers human history. Here in the United States, ever since September 11, we have been told that compromises in freedom must be made in order for our government to provide security. The evolution of the Internet has again brought this debate into the public sphere. The most common ways in which governments infringe on individual liberties where the Internet is concerned are:

* Blocking or filtering content that they deem to be “dangerous”. (E.g., China is notorious for doing this).
* Targeting the systems and networks (also known as “cyber attacks”) belonging to those that criticize their regime.
* Punishing (e.g., arrest, jail, murder) those that violate laws regarding content.
* Paying journalists to publish or praise the government.
* Conducting spying/surveillance on the suspected party.
* Shutting off networks which make Internet access possible.

(Kelly et al., 2013)

Last year, Edward Snowden, a contractor working for the National Security Agency (NSA) of the United States, revealed the existence of the PRISM program, in which data was being gathered from “major US technology companies”, “as well as mass-intercepting data from” internet and phone lines without first obtaining a warrant (The Guardian, 2014). This is in violation of the fourth amendment of the United States Constitution, which prohibits unreasonable searches and seizures without first obtaining a warrant. So far, it is not conclusive as to whether or not this program has actually prevented any terrorist attacks.

One of the issues of concern of the PRISM program is of course that of trust in the government and the corporations that enable it. Before signing on, users of Internet services have usually been provided privacy policies that their information is secure, and will not be given to any party without consent. The United States, which is supposed to be a “beacon of freedom” has been exposed as contradicting its own laws.

Unfortunately, President Obama, as well as most of the United States Congress have appeared unapologetic, and instead have “doubled-down” by explaining that no laws have been broken (Henningsen, 2013). Those in power in Washington DC clamoring for more oversight into such programs are few and far between. Rand Paul, a senator representing the state of Kentucky, has joined a lawsuit that implicates President Obama of violating the fourth amendment of the United States Constitution (Kaplan, 2014)

Going forward, it is highly unlikely that such programs such as PRISM will cease. As the former president of the United States said in his speech titled ‘A Time for Choosing’, “No government every voluntarily reduces itself in size. So governments' programs, once launched, never disappear.” (Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Library, 2009). Therefore, the only viable way to safeguard abuses of power is to have more transparency and oversight. Thomas Jefferson, who authored the United States Declaration of Independence and was our country’s third president, famously stated in 1834 that, “the price of liberty is eternal vigilance”. This statement still holds true to this day.

References:

The Guardian (2014) ‘The NSA Files’, *The Guardian* [Online]. Available from: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/the-nsa-files> (Accessed: 24 May 2014)

Henningsen, P. (2013) ‘NSA Is More Than Just A Spy Network, It’s Global Fascism’, *Russia Today* [Online]. Available from: <http://rt.com/op-edge/nsa-network-global-fascism-167/> (Accessed: 24 May 2014)

Kaplan, R. (2014) ‘Rand Paul Sues Obama over NSA Surveillance’, *CBS News* [Online]. Available from: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/rand-paul-sues-obama-over-nsa-surveillance/> (Accessed: 25 May 2014)

Kelly et al. (2013) *Freedom on the Internet 2013: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media* [Online]. Available from: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-internet-freedom-deteriorates-worldwide-activists-push-back#.U4EIIRaI3Ro> (Accessed: 24 May 2014)

Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation & Library (2009) *A Time for Choosing*, [Youtube Video, Online]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXBswFfh6AY> (Accessed: 24 May 2014)