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# **Surveillance and Counter Surveillance**

## December 1, 2009

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# **Surveillance and Countersurveillance**

Surveillance: For Good -- and for Evil Whether terrorists are attempting to assassinate a high-ranking government official, bring down a building or explode a bomb in a subway, their first order of business is to determine how best to set up the attack. To make such a determination, pre-operational surveillance of the target is vital.

If the target is a person, surveillance will determine his or her patterns of behavior; for a building, subway or other facility, the surveillance would help define possible weaknesses. In this way, attackers can determine the best time, location and method for the attack; how best to take advantage of the element of surprise — and how to escape afterward.



Courtesy of STR/AFP/Getty Images.

Passengers watch as a crowded subway train leaves a station in Beijing. These are major targets for terrorist attacks.

Terrorists, of course, are not alone in this regard. Carrying out an attack of any kind — a bank robbery, purse snatching or kidnapping, for example — requires that the perpetrators eye their target in advance, although the extent of the surveillance and its complexity will vary depending on the scale of the operation and the end goal. A purse snatcher, for example, might size up the victim for only a few seconds, while terrorists could assign a special team for this specific mission and then take up to several weeks to get the job done. Kidnappers and assassins also conduct surveillance of varying lengths to understand the target's daily routine, including the time he leaves the house in the morning and the route he takes to work.

U.S. and Jordanian intelligence indicates that the cell involved in the Nov. 9 suicide bombings in Amman, Jordan, conducted surveillance on all three hotels involved, though details about the length and degree of surveillance remain murky. The perpetrators of the April 1992 kidnapping of Exxon executive Sidney Reso conducted extensive surveillance and found that Reso was most vulnerable when he reached the end of his driveway on the way to work in the morning. Reso died while in captivity.

Stalkers or mentally disturbed individuals who fixate on someone surveil their victims in advance, although in many cases the stalker wants to get caught and thus does not need to be looking for possible escape routes. Also, a stalker usually strikes impulsively with little consideration given to the consequences. Stalkers or lone wolf attackers generally will conduct surveillance alone, making them difficult, but not impossible, to spot.

A great deal of surveillance also is conducted for purposes of collecting information. U.S. government employees and American businesspeople and business facilities overseas are routinely subjected to surveillance by local intelligence agencies in places such as China, France and Israel. The goal here is economic espionage aimed at keeping abreast of business activities — and stealing business secrets. Industrial spies, though working for themselves or for private concerns, have similar goals. Private investigators routinely observe people and places for their clients, usually to link an individual to a particular activity or event.

Not all surveillance is conducted for nefarious purposes, however. On the contrary, surveillance is an integral part of U.S. law enforcement and intelligence operations designed to prevent criminal and terrorist activity. Security personnel place closed circuit TV in retail stores and banks to deter criminals, while police officers stake out certain street corners to keep tabs on drug-traffickers, for instance.

Surveillance is a fact of life in the 21st century. In many ways, technological advances have made it easier for law enforcement to protect citizens. These advances, however, also have made it easier for those who wish to do harm.



Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, and key DHS officials, monitor events across the United States.

# The Spread of Technological Surveillance

As far back as the 5th century B.C., Chinese warrior-philosopher Sun Tzu went on record citing the paramount importance of using spies and clandestine reconnaissance to uncover enemy plans. At the time — and for centuries afterward — surveillance involved placing an operative close enough to a target to track his movements or overhear his conversations. Technological advances — especially those that have come along over the past century — have made it possible not only to watch and listen to others from afar, but to do so with ease.

Today, technical surveillance is conducted for a wide variety of purposes by individuals as diverse as terrorists, private investigators, activists, paparazzi, peeping toms, law enforcement and governments — and even by parents who listen in on their infants via baby monitors. These people are tracking a subject's activities, usually from a distance or remotely, using devices specifically designed

or adapted for that purpose such as global positioning system (GPS) locaters, sophisticated listening devices and cameras of all kinds.

Al Qaeda used technical surveillance when targeting financial institutions in Washington, D.C., New York and Newark, N.J., and potential targets in Singapore in 2003. In New York, for example, several operatives sat in a Starbucks café across the street from their intended target and recorded various aspects of the institution's security measures and building access. Their notes and some of their videos were found on a laptop computer after authorities broke up the cell. Although al Qaeda's uses less-sophisticated technology than some — hand-held cameras versus micro-cameras and bionic ears, for example — the network's ability to conduct technical surveillance still is formidable.

Environmental activists, animal rights activists, anarchists and anti-globalization activists frequently surveil their subjects before staging a protest or "direct action" operations. Groups that target corporations for sabotage, such as the Earth Liberation Front, are especially sophisticated in the use of technical surveillance.

The Ruckus Society is a group devoted to training activists in "electronic scouting" — technical surveillance involving the use of remote cameras, GPS locators, frequency counters, programmable scanners and night-vision goggles. Program graduates, then, utilize high-tech equipment such as miniature remote cameras and "bionic ear" listening devices to conduct their surveillance. These activists frequently use programmable scanners and cameras to monitor security/police communications and activity in order to warn the saboteurs of an impeding response by law enforcement.

In some countries, it is not uncommon for Western business or government travelers to find telltale signs of listening devices in their hotel rooms, offices, meeting rooms and chauffeur-driven cars. In other instances, people have been caught spying on others in public bathrooms and changing rooms using tiny cameras that can be concealed in something as seemingly innocuous as an air freshener or electrical outlet.

The accessibility and miniature size of today's surveillance equipment makes it easy for just about anyone to clandestinely watch another. As technology continues to advance and surveillance becomes even more ubiquitous, methods to thwart such eavesdropping also will improve.

# Physical Surveillance: Tailing Someone on the Move

The image of the darkly clad private eye slipping in and out of doorways as he surreptitiously tails his subject around the busy city is straight out of the movies. The fact is, however, that physical surveillance often is carried out this way — using a lot of shoe leather. Technological advances and expert training in stealth have made the job easier than in the past, but when it comes down to it, there is no other way to keep an eye on a subject who is on the move.

Technical surveillance is carried out remotely, usually through video or audio recording equipment, and the subject remains in one place, such as a hotel room, home or office. Physical surveillance, on the other hand, is performed by human

operatives, and often involves observing the subject's actions as he travels around outside the home or office.

In fact, private investigators lack the enormous human and technical resources needed to get the job done right. This type of surveillance requires a large number of highly trained operatives who must be constantly trained as improvements in techniques are implemented. This requires a significant support structure of instructors, facilities, money and material, as well as a well-developed network of communications to link the operatives together.

Physical surveillance can be broken down into two categories: static and mobile. Static surveillance favors the home team, and puts a visitor or newcomer to the scene of the surveillance at a disadvantage. If the operatives conducting the surveillance are familiar with the area, they can better blend in with the local scenery, and thus be harder to detect. They also can better anticipate their subject's moves. The Soviets used static surveillance against U.S. Embassy personnel in Moscow during the Cold War. On the other hand, if the subject is local and the operatives are from outside the area, the advantage goes to the subject, who would be in a better position to spot people in his environment who do not fit in — especially in small settings.

However, static surveillance — when carried out properly — is difficult to detect because good surveillance operatives blend in with their surroundings and make themselves as innocuous as possible. As creatures of habit, most people get used to their surroundings, and fail to notice things they see every day. By blending in with the scenery the subject sees every day, such as the local neighborhood or route taken every morning to work, the operative can effectively become invisible. Because of this, static surveillance requires a high degree of situational awareness — and a certain amount of paranoia — to detect.

Although static surveillance is the hardest type to detect and counter, it is expensive — as it can involve renting apartments, stores, street vendor kiosks and carts and other similar observation posts, known as "perches" in surveillance jargon. Because the operatives do not move, static surveillance requires that operatives be perched at close intervals so that they can keep a constant eye on the target. In general, only governments have the manpower and resources necessary to do this type of surveillance properly.

Mobile surveillance can be carried out in two ways: in vehicles or on foot. A wider area can be covered in vehicular surveillance — and is vital if the subject is traveling by car — although this type of surveillance does have limitations. Should the subject go into an office building, a subway or a shopping mall, for example, the operatives in the vehicle cannot follow. Because of this limitation, vehicular surveillance is usually carried out in conjunction with foot surveillance. The operatives on foot are in communication with the operatives in the vehicle. In addition, the operatives in the vehicle will often drop off one of their team to continue following the target. Mixed car/foot operations are effective because the target more often will focus on other pedestrians rather than the cars around him.



Courtesy of DANIEL GARCIA/AFP/Getty Images.

People crossing San Martin street, at one side of Plaza San Martín in Retiro, one of the historical neighborhoods of Buenos Aires.

Depending on the resources available or allocated for a specific operation, mobile surveillance can range from an operative following the subject on foot — the hardest type of surveillance to accomplish without being detected — to an elaborate operation that puts the subject in a "bubble." The highest level involves multiple mobile and static surveillance teams all linked by communications and coordinating with one another to ensure that the subject's every movement is monitored — and that the team is not detected.

The bubble also provides protection against any erratic move the target might utilize to determine if he is being watched, or to ditch the surveillance. Therefore, if the team senses that the target has begun to "stairstep" (a series of deliberate turns intended to expose a surveillance team) through a residential neighborhood with very little activity on the street, the team using the bubble can wait outside the area instead of following the target through the maneuvers. Teams using a bubble will also frequently change "the eye" (the person directly watching the target) so that the target does not see the same face or vehicle twice. Again, in almost all cases, only a government has the resources and training to effectively provide this highest level of surveillance coverage.

In order to conduct surveillance uninterrupted over a long period of time, a combination of static and vehicular surveillance is often employed. Static surveillance operatives will stake out the subject's location — perhaps renting an apartment across the street from the person's home, and then give a "call out" to the mobile surveillance team when the subject moves. The static operative will advise the mobile team what direction the subject is going and if the subject is on foot or in a vehicle.

Physical surveillance — especially on a surveillance-aware target — is extremely difficult to carry out effectively, as it requires a great deal of training and practical experience. Criminals and terrorists who attempt to pull off an effective tail often lack the street skills to be effective, and often make mistakes that tip off the target. Because their objective can be to ambush — to kill or kidnap the subject — spotting physical surveillance is of critical importance.

# Physical Surveillance: The Art of Blending In

Role playing is an important aspect of undercover surveillance work — and those who attempt it without sufficient training often make mistakes that can alert their subject to the fact that they are being watched, or raise the suspicions of law enforcement or countersurveillance teams.

Among the most common mistakes made by amateurs when conducting physical surveillance is the failure to get into proper character for the job or, when in character, to appear in places or carry out activities that are incongruent with the "costume." The terms used to describe these role-playing aspects of surveillance are "cover for status" and "cover for action." Good cover for status is an operative playing the role of a student studying in a coffee shop; bad cover for status is an operative dressed in business clothes walking in the woods. Good cover for action is an operative dressed as a telephone repairman pretending to work on phone lines — not playing chess in the park.

The purpose of using good cover for action and cover for status is to make the operative's presence look routine and normal. When done right, the operative fits in with the mental snapshot subconsciously taken by the subject as he goes about his business. Inexperienced surveillance operative, or those without adequate resources, can be easily detected and their cover blown.

An acronym used by government agencies when training operatives in effective surveillance is TEDD: Time, Environment, Distance and Demeanor. Failure to take into account these four elements is another amateurish mistake that can get the operative caught. The factors of time, environment and distance are important because a subject who notices the same person hovering around again and again at different times and locations is more likely to become aware that he is being watched. Demeanor refers to lack of cover or simply bad body language — which also can alert a subject to the presence of a surveillance team.

A surveillance operative also must be extensively trained to avoid the so-called "burn syndrome," the erroneous belief that the subject has spotted him. Feeling burned will cause the operative to do unnatural things, such as suddenly ducking back into a doorway or turning around abruptly when he unexpectedly comes

face to face with his target. People inexperienced in the art of surveillance find it difficult to control this natural reaction.

These are just a few of the enormous number of mistakes that amateurs can make while conducting physical surveillance. They also can tip off the subject as to their presence by simply lurking around an area with no reason to be there, by entering or leaving a building immediately after the subject, or simply by running in street clothes.

Surveillance operatives following the subject in a vehicle also can make many mistakes, including:

- Parking in the same spot for an extended period of time while sitting in the front seat.
- Starting and stopping as the target moves.
- Driving too slowly or too fast and making erratic moves or abrupt stops.
- Signaling a turn but not making it.
- Following a target through a red light.
- Using two-way radios, binoculars or cameras from a vehicle.
- Flashing headlights between vehicles.
- Maintaining the same distance from the target even at varying speeds.
- Pausing in traffic circles until the target vehicle has taken an exit.
- vehicles that close on the target in heavy traffic but fall back in light traffic
- Jumping from the vehicle when the subject stops his vehicle and gets out.
- Parking a vehicle but remaining in the car.
- Tipping off the subject as to a shift change by having one vehicle pull up and park while the other pulls away — especially in an area the subject knows well, such as near the home or office.

In general, because of the resources and extensive training required to avoid making these mistakes, only governments have the time and resources to make surveillance operations highly effective. Even then, some very basic mistakes can be made that can alert the subject to the presence of a surveillance operation.

### Turning the Tables on Surveillants

Victims of planned hostile actions — such as kidnappings or killings — almost always are closely monitored by their attackers in advance of the operation. Such pre-operational surveillance enables the plotters to determine the best method of attack, as well as the best time and place to carry it out. Savvy countersurveillance, however, can go a long way toward thwarting a hostile act.

The cardinal rule for personal safety is for people to be aware of their surroundings at all times and to observe the behavior of others in the area. However, detecting surveillance — especially when it is performed well — often requires that one take extra precautions. One of the best ways for a person to determine whether he or she is being tailed is to use a surveillance detection route (SDR). By altering their behavior, those under surveillance can manipulate

the situation, causing members of the surveillance team to act in ways that betray their presence and intentions. In fact, understanding that a potential victim can manipulate a surveillance situation is one of the most important lessons to be gleaned from this series.

Although hiring professional surveillance detection and countersurveillance teams — or drivers trained to provide more than a smooth ride — are obvious choices, not everyone who is at risk has the resources to do so. Individuals, however, can take a number of steps to determine whether they are under hostile surveillance. Techniques for manipulating surveillance teams include stair-stepping, varying routes and departure times, using intrusion points, and timing stops.

The most common and effective SDR tool is the channel — a long, straight corridor that has several exits or routes at the far end. A person who wants to ensure he is not being tailed can use the channel to force the surveillant to follow closely behind. This is because the operative cannot parallel the subject's route and cannot know which way the subject will go at the end of the channel. Natural channels are long narrow bridges and sections of highway that have no exits or overpasses, but that branch out in a number of routes on the far side. The subway is also a type of channel. Most people likely use such channels in their daily routes but are unaware of them.

Stair-stepping involves making turns — in a vehicle or on foot — that deviate slightly from the most direct route to the destination. During a stair-stepping sequence, a surveillant is likely to reveal his presence by staying with his subject during the series of turns — a common mistake among amateur surveillance operatives who fear losing sight of the target. The subject, however, should not make sudden, unnatural movements, or the surveillance team will break off without revealing its presence.

By varying routes and departure times, the subject can cause surveillants to go into action abruptly in order to compensate for the change in plans. Unless it has a wide area covered, the team could be forced to break off surveillance or act more overtly to prevent losing its target. Varying departure times from fixed locations such as the home or office also can be quite effective because it can force the surveillants to remain in one place longer than anticipated — and thus attract attention.

An intrusion point is a place along a person's route, preferably with a secondary exit such as a back door, where a surveillance target can stop and see whether anyone is following. If the intrusion point has a secondary exit, the subject can give the surveillance team the slip by heading out the back door. If the surveillance team knows the place, however, it could very well have another surveillant waiting by the secondary exit. This kind of coverage generally requires the kind of resources that only a government can lavish on a surveillance operation. Intrusion points — like all parts of the SDR — cannot be random. They should be planned in advance and worked into a daily routine.

Finally, conducting timing stops is one more way to spot hostile surveillance. A timing stop is a place where a person stops and looks back before reaching the

final destination to ensure he is not being tailed. It doesn't have to be long — especially in a vehicle.

Physical threats to individuals from terrorists, assassins, kidnappers or even stalkers are site-dependant. The assailants choose the location and timing of their attack based on criteria that gives them the best chance of successfully carrying out the attack and — unless the attacker is mentally disturbed or on a suicide mission — of escaping. These criteria include restricting or controlling the target's ability to maneuver or escape, and providing optimal cover for any surveillance or attack team.

Another way to safeguard against potential hazards is by conducting an analysis of one's normal route to identify points of vulnerability such as overpasses, bridges and tunnels, to minimize hazards and deny potential attackers any advantage. Route analysis can also identify potential attack sites — points along the route that restrict the target's movement, and provide cover and an escape route for the attackers. Once a potential attack site is identified, possible vantage points — or perches — for hostile surveillance or attack teams should be watched.

High-profile individuals or anyone who resides in a high-crime or -terrorism area such as Mexico City or Baghdad should take the initiative and identify surveillants before they have the opportunity to strike. Once hostile surveillance has been identified, immediate action should be taken and assistance called in.

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