

[Common Error No. 1](#) [1]

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[This is the first in a new series of blogs to be published over the coming months. Each piece will look at a common error people make about free markets and the free society, and explain why they are mistaken. We hope readers of this blog will be able to make use of these arguments themselves, and in doing so convince others of the overwhelming case for liberty - Ed.]

1. "Only the guilty have anything to fear from surveillance or police searches."

The cry of oppressive and intrusive authority has always been that "only the guilty have anything to fear." It isn't true. Even the innocent have to fear an over-mighty and intrusive state. It has always been the case in free societies that each individual has a private domain which he or she is allowed to keep private. It's not that it holds guilty secrets, but that it holds private things that are no-one else's business.

Why should the state be allowed to open our mail, to snoop on our electronic communications, to tap our phones and to spy on us with its cameras? We are right to wonder why an innocent state would want such information about us. The mere possession of such information poses, in itself, the risk of abuse. Those with access to it are put in positions of power over others; the information could be used to blackmail or intimidate. It need not be about illegal activity, merely that which would cause embarrassment if it were known.

In free societies we put limits on the law. We deny it the right to snoop on the off-chance of finding guilt, but require it to show good cause for its investigation. We demand that it states what crime is suspected, rather than allowing it general warrants to see what it might find. We are not servants and underlings to be ordered about and kept in place by a mighty state: rather are we free citizens who sustain that state to serve us. It has no right to powers beyond those we accord it, and we do not choose to give it the right to know more about us than it needs to know in order to serve and protect us.

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