

## DISPUTATION CLXXI

October 19, 2017

Dear Peucinians,

Please note the later-than-usual start time. Also different than usual: we will be starting on time.

Now that we've decided that we do not wish to live forever, we turn away from an abstract personal question and instead consider a concrete societal one. This debate will should reveal our ethical commitments, expose the utilitarians and the deontologists among us, and thoroughly shake us down for something—anything—resembling a moral core.

### **RESOLVED: EMBRACE DOMESTIC SURVEILLANCE**

**Affirmative: Lewis Carroll '18**

**Negative: Henrik Ibsen '18**

In a [short and pertinent essay](#), the late David Foster Wallace asks, “Are some things still worth dying for?” He proposes that American society trades 40,000 highway deaths every year in return for the freedom and enjoyment we get from automobiles. Would it not be a similarly good trade to sacrifice the equivalent of a 9/11 every once in a while for the freedom and enjoyment we get from privacy?

Over the years, writers have distorted—and made famous—a quotation from Benjamin Franklin that doesn't mean what it appears, but may be useful for us. He wrote, “Those who would give up essential Safety, to purchase a little temporary Liberty, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.” Truly, every bit of security added necessitates giving up some liberty, but the tradeoff is often worth it. No reasonable person would doubt that traffic lights—which limit our freedom to drive uninterrupted in exchange for safer passage through intersections—are a bad idea. To be even safer, we could ban the car, or the gun, or the deep fryer: but we don't. We don't because we'd be giving up something more valuable than our safety, and apparently American citizens have valued these freedoms more highly than some level of security.

When it comes to terrorism and war, those who think a vague notion or “right” of privacy is important just don't understand the size of the threat—weapons of the future are deadly and huge. We should do anything we can to stop destruction from occurring. Without surveillance, how could we possibly hope to stop large-scale attacks? Moreover, privacy is overvalued anyway. Are our day-to-day lives really changed because faceless bureaucrats might be listening and watching? What about robots that are only looking for key words and red flags? Surely this minor uneasiness—one we will grow out of—is worth saving thousands of lives from acts of war and terror. As for concerns about abuse of power: a reasonably designed system of checks and balances, democratic rule of law, and accountability should mitigate these consequences. An Orwellian world seems unlikely with thoughtful policy and good leaders.

A number of objections to this argument seem appropriate. The first is that death—possibly much of it—is a fair price to pay for privacy. Privacy is incredibly valuable: it permits us a sense of self and individual identity free from the constricting norms of society and culture. These choices we make about ourselves generate our individuality and dignity; surveillance degrades this dignity, rendering us less capable of fulfilling ourselves. A second objection is that no administrative system, no matter how intelligently designed, can overcome the unassailable human proclivity to abuse power. Surveillance is a particularly tempting power to abuse, because who watches the watchers? Finally, it is worthwhile to point out that surveillance is a reactionary security measure—it does nothing to address the root causes of war, terror, and mass murder.

What will it be, Peucinians? Should our country—and therefore, we—embrace a program of surveillance, giving up one more freedom for more safety? Or do we value rights, dignity, and our time with no one watching? Are we willing to pay for that luxury with the blood of our fellow citizens?

**Thursday, October 19, 8:15 p.m.**  
**Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall**  
**Semi-formal attire**

*ex animo,*  
Jean-Jacques Rousseau

*Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus*