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Laura Laura Poitras filming NSA Utah Data Center construction site

Primary Documents

by Lauren Cornell

When American Edward Snowden blew the whistle on NSA domestic surveillance this past June, Laura Poitras was behind the camera, directing the interview, along with The Guardian journalist Glenn Greenwald. Through the short films that followed as well as groundbreaking related reporting, including exposing the NSA's PRISM program, Poitras has played an essential role in alerting the public to the vulnerability of their privacy. A tremendous response, from international citizens and governments alike, continues to develop.

A renowned documentary filmmaker, and recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship in 2012, among numerous other awards, Poitras is known for films that evoke complex political realities through personal stories. For the past decade she has focused on a trilogy of feature-length documentaries about America post-9/11. My Country My Country (2006), set in Baghdad during the 2005 elections, and The Oath (2010), filmed in Yemen and Guantanamo Bay, will be followed by a film that returns to the US to examine the ways the government has turned towards and against its own citizens through surveillance. I first started following Poitras' work in 2003, when I saw Flag Wars, an incredibly moving film about gentrification in Columbus, Ohio told through the city's residents. The film demonstrates the same intense commitment, critical analysis and emotional power evident in all her work. The interview below is an edited transcription of a phone call on July 21st, and email correspondences; it focuses on her approach to documentary filmmaking, specifically around the trilogy, her reporting on Snowden's disclosures, and her latest work.

Lauren Cornell: So, my first question is: how are you?
Laura Poitras: Wow, that's complicated. I'm really good. It's been a really intense few weeks. There's the work that happened in Hong Kong but before that there were many months of communication that were also intense. I feel better in this phase than I did then. It's incredible to see the international response to the disclosures. My fear was that the world would not take notice and the risks involved would be in vain. And, thankfully, that's not what's happening.

LC: You've inspired so many people with your work. And, Snowden, Greenwald and you are getting so much attention at the moment. When I wrote you about this interview, explaining it was for Mousse, you agreed right away. I imagine you're inundated with requests—is the context of an art magazine more compelling for you, or more open, than a news or entertainment style publication?
LP: I get a lot of requests, and I often say no for various reasons. One of them simply being time, and another being that I'm in the middle of a work-in-progress, and I usually don't discuss projects I'm working on. In addition, I need to remain close emotionally to the story I want to tell, and if I start doing lots of interviews I'm going to lose that connection.
Speaking to you and Mousse gives me a chance to talk about my work from an art making perspective. This is obviously a huge news story that I'm reporting on, but in addition I'm also doing it in the context of making films, or cinema, and I'm interested in talking about

how those things intersect. For instance, how you can do on-the-ground reporting about the occupation of Iraq that gives insight into that war, that advances the public's knowledge, and yet at the same time produce art and make people care about things. So talking to you gives me an opportunity to have a conversation about complex questions, and not a conversation that feeds the mainstream media news cycle.

LC: Let's discuss the previous films in your trilogy, as they contextualize the new work on domestic surveillance you're immersed in now. "My Country, My Country" (2006) tells the story of an extraordinary person, Doctor Riyadh, an Iraqi doctor and Sunni political candidate, against the backdrop of the US occupation of Baghdad. In the film, you have this incredible access to his life—from his living room, where his kids discuss events in the city, to his office, where patients are vulnerable not only about physical issues but also due to the impact of the occupation on their lives and family. How did you meet him and build such a strong relationship with him?

LP: I went to Iraq wanting to document the precedent of preemptive war, and I wanted to reveal the profound contradiction of occupying a country to bring democracy. That is why I focused on the elections.

I met Doctor Riyadh at Abu Ghraib Prison after I'd been there about a month. This was a few weeks after the horrifying Abu Ghraib photographs were made public in the news. A group of local Iraqi politicians demanded to inspect the prison and got access to film the inspection. In the film, you see the scene where I met Dr. Riyadh at Abu Ghraib. After that, he invited me to come to his clinic and film there. It was really quite extraordinary that he extended the invitation. That time, in 2004, was probably one of the most violent in terms of kidnappings and targeting of foreigners, and when I went to Iraq I didn't anticipate that I would be invited into a home like that, because of the risks that would be involved for everyone. But this was somebody who was very brave and wanted the world to understand what daily life was like in Iraq under occupation. At Abu Ghraib, he said, you need to come to my clinic. And from there, I started filming in his neighborhood and his home.

He made me rethink my preconceptions. I began the film as a critic of the occupation, and therefore I thought this election process was by default illegitimate. I mean, how can you have free elections in an occupied country? But I had to rethink my preconceptions, because here you've got Dr. Riyadh who is a critic of the occupation and yet he chose to be a candidate, he chose to put his life on the line, for this democratic process.

By the end of the film and the end of my experience there, and hopefully for audiences, what happens is that we are the ones who get to learn about democracy from the Iraqis. They are the ones who are talking politics all the time, the ones who are putting their lives on the line to participate in the electoral process. Despite death threats, they had a higher turnout than US elections. I feel that we put Iraqis in this horrible predicament where if they participated, they were seen as subject to being targeted and assassinated. But what they want is what everyone wants—self-determination—so they were willing to take those risks. It was a really tragic situation. No matter what happened, it seemed that it was going to lead to tragedy.

Doctor Riyadh at Abu Ghraib, (still), *My Country, My Country*, 2006
by Laura Poitras

LC: You've described your work as the creation of a "primary document." This film depicts the complex reality of the US occupation of Iraq, one that isn't seen in the mainstream news. If it is to be seen as a primary document, what are its key disclosures? And who, what public, do you have in mind for the story?

LP: I operate with two different ideas, or methods, as a filmmaker: to document and to tell stories. In Iraq I wanted to understand what this occupation looked like, and I wanted to understand it from the perspective of civilians. But I'm also telling a story. The film is a document of the war, but it's told through the individual characters that tell a story that is more universal than the war.

I try to film events unfolding in real time, not to talk about things that have happened in the past, because I think in the present tense you understand the real stakes and drama of conflicts as they unfold. I shot more than 200 hours in Baghdad and I consider that a direct record of the war. I edited it to make one film, but I also have this other material that is an archive of the occupation.

There are many different post-9/11 events, whether we're talking about the invasion of Iraq, or Guantanamo, or the growing surveillance state. We could talk about all these things from a theoretical perspective, but they actually have real-world consequences for people. I like to get as close as I can so we can understand how things play out on individual lives.

And then from those primary documents, I'm very interested in making the audience connect on an emotional level to what they're witnessing.
I think there is an emotional divide between what we intellectually know about the world and how we feel about that knowledge. In my work I want to try to close that divide. We hear about suicide bombings or drone strikes, and in most cases we go about our day as if it hasn't impacted us at all. It's often not people we know. It's an abstract thing. Most Americans have a lot of information about the fact that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians died in the war, people are dying in drone strikes, people are being detained at Guantanamo for 11-plus years. It's in our consciousness—it's not secret information—but we don't have any kind of connection to what that actually means for people who are impacted directly.
So the primary document is to have a record, as a documentarian, or a journalist, but it also allows me a way to craft narratives that take you closer and give you a different perspective on events that you think you know about. Or that people who pay attention to the news and world events think they know about. I hope the work both builds compassion and informs people. That is certainly my experience in making these films.

LC: "The Oath" is an intimate portrait of two men considered terrorists by the US: Abu Jandal, the former bodyguard of Osama Bin Ladin, and Salim Hamdan, a prisoner at Guantanamo. Was your interest, with this film, to humanize or complicate popular depictions of the terrorist? When you worked with them, did you trust them and believe them? In general, how do you gauge trust with your subjects?
LP: The Oath was a darker and more complicated film than My Country, My Country, and also much more complicated on the political level, around issues of knowledge and trust. The genesis of it was that I was editing my Iraq film and I knew I wanted to make the next film about Guantanamo. I had a very different film in mind. I was looking for the story of somebody who was innocent and sent to Guantanamo. I was looking for a much simpler story to tell.
I went to Yemen, and in my first week there I was introduced to Bin Laden's former bodyguard turned taxi driver. My brain actually couldn't process this knowledge. How is this guy driving a taxicab? There are all these people at Guantanamo who have no direct contact with Bin Laden. I wanted to know: why is this person free? Who is he?
Lawrence Wright wrote an incredible book called The Looming Tower, which is a history of Al-Qaeda and Bin Laden and 9/11. I had read that book before going to Yemen and when I met Abu Jandal I remembered that he was an essential figure in that book. Abu Jandal was interrogated in the immediate aftermath of 9/11—starting less than a week after 9/11. That interrogation is pivotal in 9/11's history. It is remarkable as an interrogation because he wasn't subjected to torture, or rendition. Rather, he was read his Miranda rights and ended providing key information about Al Qaeda. He condemned the 9/11 attacks. So I was very interested in him as a pivotal figure in this history. His interrogation is evidence of a road not taken. Instead, we went down a path of rendition and torture. Abu Jandal shows us that was not necessary.
But as a filmmaker, I was terrified to make a film about him. I wasn't so much worried that anything would happen to me, but narratively it was so complicated. It was a bit of a minefield, how to tell the story. But I was also just fascinated by him. So I figured—I can walk away from a fascinating story, or I can tell it and go into a dangerous zone. In the end, I decided it's not the job of journalists or filmmakers or documentarians to only make films

about things we like, or people who are simple, or people who are easy to identify with. With him, the story is very much about what we do and don't trust. He's revealed as a classic unreliable narrator. You think you know who he is and you believe him and then, holy shit, this is not what I knew, and then you understand him as someone who could be a different person to different people.
I was interested in Salim Hamdan's case, the court case that happens in Guantanamo, because he's a ghost in the film. You hear his words, from his letters, but he's absent. So I went to Yemen looking for a subject, a protagonist, who I could follow and show a simple case of someone innocent who gets caught up, but it ended up being much more complicated. They weren't the innocent ones. It becomes, then, a question of how justice and the rule of law work or don't work in this context.

Abu Jandal, (still), *The Oath*, 2010
by Laura Poitras

LC: Because of these films, you've been stopped and detained 40-plus times at the border, and your computer has been taken. Was your personal experience of harassment, intimidation and surveillance that led you to the final work in the trilogy?
LP: It was a number of events. When I went to Iraq I was more naive, in the sense that I thought, well, in the United States the pendulum has swung into this extreme mode where the rule of law is abandoned in the name of national security, and I thought soon it would swing back and there would be investigations of things like indefinite detention without charges, torture, etc. But it became clear that that wasn't the trajectory the country was moving in. The fact that I started getting harassed at the border was evidence of that.

I always had the sense that I wanted to bring the third part of the trilogy back home. Domestic surveillance was on my mind while I was working in Yemen. Obviously the fact that I'm detained at the border and don't feel confident that I can bring computers or my notebooks into the country, doing this kind of work, certainly makes me acutely aware of the impact of a state that surveys its own people. It heightened my awareness of that as a really pernicious kind of oppression of a population. The US is not the first case. Just look at the former East Germany. Countries spy on each other, we know that. But when a country starts to spy on its own citizens, it's really about control, and authoritarianism, and squashing dissent. And to make people feel that they are at risk to engage in any kind of activity that is perceived as dissenting by the government.

If you're a Muslim American in the United States, you've been aware of the repressive power of the surveillance state there since September 12, 2001. Certain populations were targeted immediately through surveillance, and have been continuously. Other populations were more aggressively targeted later, such as activists.

So, yes, my personal experience definitely impacts my feelings on the topic. I'll probably have to address that somehow in the film, although I'm not making the film about my experience directly. I also think that the fact that I've been targeted in the way I have has made me able to tell the story because I've had to become really educated about things like encryption and protecting materials, which has enabled me to film people where security is necessary.

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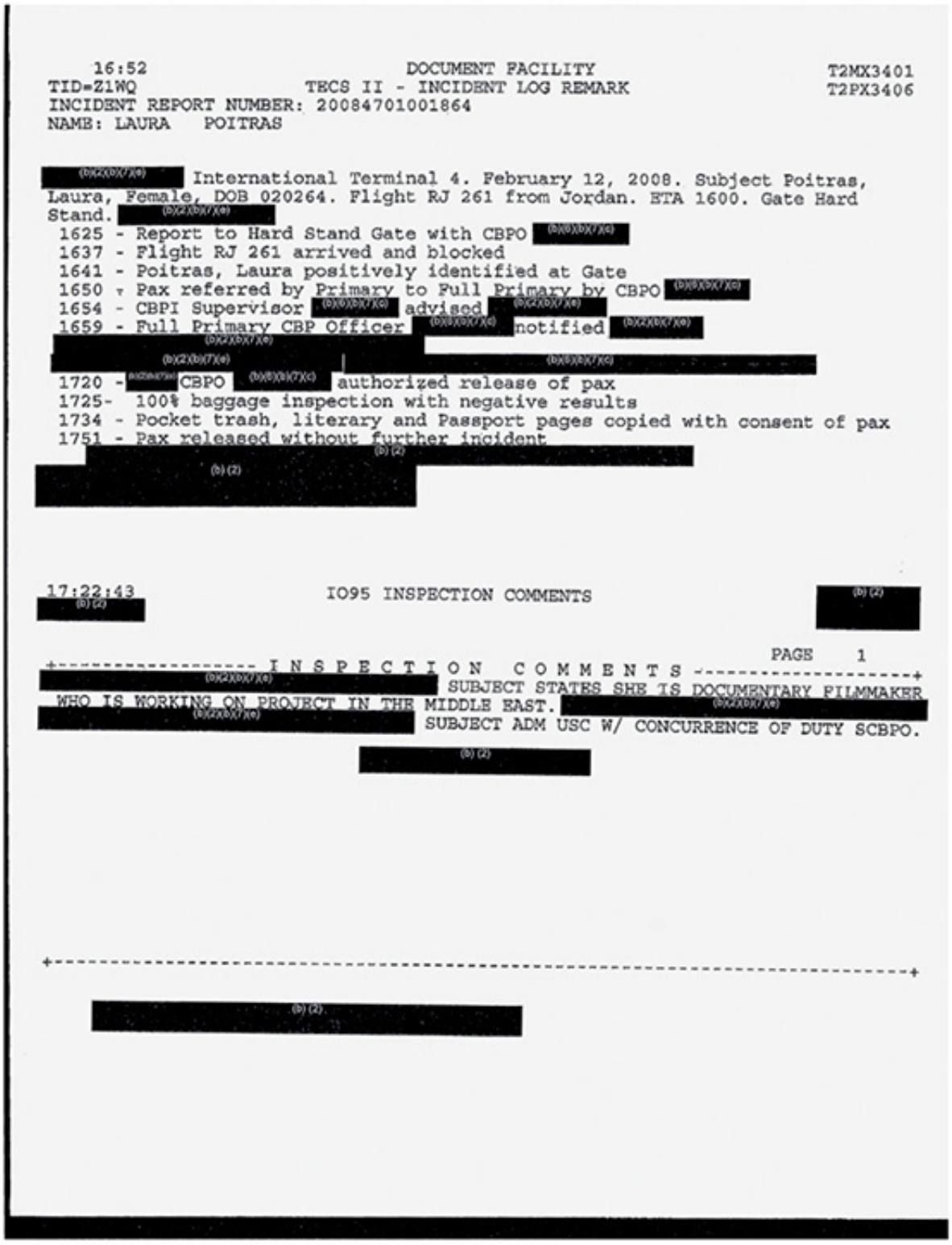

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NAME: LAURA POITRAS

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1625 - Report to Hard Stand Gate with CBPO [redacted]
1637 - Flight RJ 261 arrived and blocked
1641 - Poitras, Laura positively identified at Gate
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1654 - CBPI Supervisor [redacted] advised [redacted]
1659 - Full Primary CBP Officer [redacted] notified [redacted]
[redacted]
1720 - [redacted] CBPO [redacted] authorized release of pax
1725- 100% baggage inspection with negative results
1734 - Pocket trash, literary and Passport pages copied with consent of pax
1751 - Pax released without further incident
[redacted]

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PAGE 1
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Department of Homeland Security Freedom of Information Act document, JFK airport, February 12, 2008

Report of Laura Poitras airport detention

LC: Can you talk about the scope or focus of the new documentary? Will it be told through stories of whistleblowers, like Snowden?

LP: The new film is in progress, so I don't know yet how it will be focused. What I say is that it will be about vast government surveillance and how the war on terror is being waged in the US. It will include attacks on journalism and whistleblowers, as well as ways that people resist this growing state power.

LC: As you mention above, part of the arc of the trilogy—an unexpected one—is that you've become a subject in your own story. Do you have any idea how you will address this in the film?
LP: I was present as the filmmaker in The Oath, but it was subtle. In the current film I will have to include my role in the story. I'm honestly still trying to wrap my head around what all this means. I feel like I'm in a hall of mirrors, and that needs to be expressed in the film in some way.

LC: How, if at all, has your process changed due to your understanding of technologies like encryption? Does a need to protect yourself and your sources affect the filmmaking process?
LP: This is an interesting question. On the one hand, being targeted has created huge obstacles for working; on the other, my current work would not have possible if I had not learned skills like encryption and protecting source material. So I guess being a target has been helpful, a kind of unintended consequence.

LC: From conducting this interview with you, it's clear how surveillance has changed basic ways you communicate—no Skype, no iPhone, preferring protected documents. On a deeper level, do you feel your vision has changed due to your knowledge of surveillance, by which I mean your basic way of observing and documenting?
LP: These things are certainly obstacles, but they don't really change the practice of making art or telling stories. That remains the same. Every film (or novel) has obstacles and challenges that need to be solved. However, what is different is the world I'm documenting. That has radically shifted. The disclosures made by Snowden have lifted a curtain and revealed a vast hidden world where decisions are made and power operates in secret outside of any public oversight or consent. So my vision hasn't really changed, but what I'm able to see has vastly increased.

LC: With the Snowden documentaries, both are shot in the same hotel room, seemingly on the same day. The first film opens with an establishing shot of Hong Kong and then switches to one single unchanging angle of Snowden's face with the back of his head reflected in the mirror. Why did you choose to shoot it this way?
lp: here were constraints. We were working in a hotel room, so I had certain limitations related to that. I filmed there in more of a vérité style, like the work you've seen in my other films, while we were working for several days before Snowden went public. The interview that was published by The Guardian was more formal. I wanted to do something that I would be able to edit and compress into a certain amount of time. So those were the aesthetic choices. It was a small space, I moved some things around, and the mirror turned out to be behind him. It wasn't symbolic; I didn't bring the mirror in from someplace else so I could get that image. It was already there. I liked it. It gives the frame depth.
The two interviews published by The Guardian were shot on the same day. The day I filmed the interview was the same day Glenn published his first piece on the Verizon FISA

document; he'd been up all night writing, we published, we knew at that point that we were going to release video and Snowden would be identified as the source, so I did that interview in a more compressed and formal way, with the intention of editing for that.

Edward Snowden interviewed by Glenn Greenwald

LC: The way Snowden presented himself through the interview you shot, instead of just releasing documents, was groundbreaking, and also incredibly dangerous. When you started working with him, do you feel he was fully aware of the risks he was taking?
LP: He first contacted me anonymously. I had no idea who he was or where he worked. I assumed for a long time that his intention was to remain anonymous. The stories that we know of whistleblowers are that they try to stay anonymous but they get discovered, and then there are repercussions. So I thought that was what I was dealing with. We were working with encryption, and he said he had information, and for most of our correspondence before we met, I assumed his intention was to remain anonymous. Then at some point in an email he revealed to me that he wanted to be identified, because he didn't want anyone else to take the blame for this.

LC: It's a tremendous act of accountability.
LP: He said he didn't want to ruin the lives of everyone who worked with him, and it would all ultimately lead back to him. He told me what he wanted me to do was not to try to hide his identity, but to actually point toward him. After I learned that, I asked to interview him on camera. His first response was no, he didn't want the story to be about him. Then I explained why, given the work that I do, for him to tell it was important. And not just because I knew the mainstream media interpretation would be predictable and narrow, but because to have somebody who understands how this technology works, who is willing to risk their life to expose it to the public, and that we could hear that articulated, would reach people in ways that the documents themselves wouldn't. So I put forth that

argument, and he agreed that we would meet, and it was several weeks later that we met.

LC: I didn't realize that it wasn't his suggestion to be filmed. It's interesting, especially as his alleged narcissism is one of the ways his character has been discredited. Of all the responses to these videos and the larger story, I've been struck, and frustrated by, the reaction: "It doesn't matter to me, because I have nothing to hide." It's a position that reflects a kind of privilege and naivete. As Snowden pointed out, even if you don't feel like you have something to hide, something can be construed through your data.

LP: If someone says, "I have nothing to hide," does that mean they want a camera in their bedroom? Or that they want their computer to be a two-way camera, feeding information into a government office? Do they want a switch that can be flipped so that your phone becomes a microphone streaming your personal conversations to the government? Most people who make the argument "I have nothing to hide" don't fully understand the technical capabilities that the government has. They are vast. All these devices that we carry around with us can, at the flip of a switch, be turned against us. Our most intimate moments, our beings, ourselves... It can become an Orwellian nightmare where all these tools that we surround ourselves with can beam our whole life to people sitting in some secret government facility.

It's not that the government is necessarily interested, it's that there's nothing to stop them, legally or technologically. And a person would never know when it's happening. They won't tell you because it's all a secret. I have a Gmail account, and I assume that everything is being handed over, probably in real time, to the government, and I think I should have a right to know that that's happening.

There are no technical constraints to this becoming a full surveillance state. And we hardly have any oversight, and any laws that exist are all happening in secret.

Laura Poitras,
Photo: Olaf Blecker

LC: In making the new film, does your broader profile as an artist and documentarian give you a greater degree of safety with travel or in your work?
LP: It's too soon to say. I've chosen to edit what I'm working on outside the US, because of the harassment. I was already based in Germany before I was contacted by Snowden. And I'm very glad, at this point. I don't know that I could provide security and protection for the material if I was in the US right now.
Let's face it: We're in uncharted territory with these disclosures. This is probably the largest leak of national security information. It's hard to say that yes, I feel safe, because that would be a bit of a stretch. But I feel that the attention that's been paid to the issue is a form of protection. It is also clear that our reporting has been in the public interest—the international response is proof of that. There's been a lot of really aggressive attacking of Glenn, since he's been more public. And that's really scary. And who knows what the government is thinking?
Glenn and I are completely committed to continuing to publish on this issue, to defend the First Amendment and the free press, and all these things that are worth fighting for. But these are scary times. You've got AP journalists who are being wiretapped, Jim Risen of The New York Times who is being compelled to testify against a source. He might end up in jail for protecting a source. Think about what that means for press freedom. But the fact that the government is even bringing these cases is terrifying. It's not a sign of democracy. It's a sign of an authoritarian surveillance state. These are indicators of the direction in which the country is going, and they are not good.

Safety: it's complicated. The fact that it's so public, the fact that if I was harassed more, it would be such a clear indicator that I'm being targeted because of my NSA reporting. But at the same time, they've gone after people like Risen. They're clearly not too worried about how history will view them.

LC: Across all your work, short films, feature documentaries, all the different subject matter, is there a guiding principle to your process?
LP: Ultimately what I try to do with my work comes down to documenting and telling stories that attempt to capture a historical moment. It can be about horrible things like Guantanamo or more celebratory things like why people engage in elections. I feel like being a documentarian and an artist working on post-9/11 issues gives me an outlet to talk about them. Otherwise I'd just be depressed. Instead I have the opportunity to say something and make a historical record.

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Doctor Riyadh at Abu Ghraib, (still), *My Country, My Country*, 2006
by Laura Poitras

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