

Flock Flack: When Surveillance Replaces Trust, Justice, and Moral Responsibility

A free society should be cautious whenever government asks citizens to surrender privacy in exchange for promises of safety.

By Staff Writer

The proposal is usually presented as straightforward: Install cameras, collect license-plate information, allow law enforcement to search the records, and crime will be reduced. Anyone who objects may be portrayed as suspicious, unreasonable, or unconcerned about public safety.

But the central question is not whether cameras can sometimes help solve crimes. Of course they can. The more important question is whether a constitutional republic should create searchable records of innocent people’s movements without individualized suspicion, a warrant, meaningful public consent, or effective oversight.

That question is not merely about technology. It reaches into the Fourth Amendment, due process, the presumption of innocence, the right to confront witnesses, and the principle that government—not the accused—must prove its case.

It also raises a deeper question: What happens to a society when it attempts to solve a moral and spiritual crisis primarily through surveillance, databases, fines, and expanding government control?

Crime Is More Than a Security Problem

Crime is often treated as a problem of insufficient policing, inadequate technology, or



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ineffective social programs. Those issues may have some relevance, but they do not address the root of the problem.

At its foundation, crime is a moral failure. It represents a breakdown in personal conscience and in the shared moral order that allows a society to live together in peace.

The Ten Commandments provide a clear framework for that moral order: “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not bear false witness,” and “You shall not covet.” These commandments establish duties

toward God and neighbor. They are not merely suggestions or changing social preferences. They represent objective standards of right and wrong.

When belief in God and accountability to Him decline, moral responsibility often declines with them. Individuals begin to view right and wrong as subjective. Excuses multiply, personal responsibility weakens, and the conscience becomes less sensitive to wrongdoing.

A person who believes he will ultimately answer to God is more likely to exercise restraint even when no police officer, camera, or database is watching. External enforcement may restrain some conduct, but it cannot create virtue. A camera can record a theft; it cannot teach a person not to steal. A database can identify a vehicle; it cannot restore a broken conscience.

This is why widespread surveillance cannot substitute for moral renewal. Technology may help address certain crimes, but it cannot repair families, form character, restore honesty, or teach the next generation to respect the lives and property of others.

The Promise and Danger of Flock Cameras

This is the concern surrounding Flock Safety cameras and other automated license-plate-reader systems. The cameras do not photograph only suspected criminals. They record vehicles traveling through public places, including vehicles belonging to people who have committed no crime. Over time, individual images can become a searchable record of a person’s movements. A single plate scan may appear harmless. A collection of scans can reveal where someone works, worships, shops, receives medical treatment, visits family, attends political meetings, or spends the night.

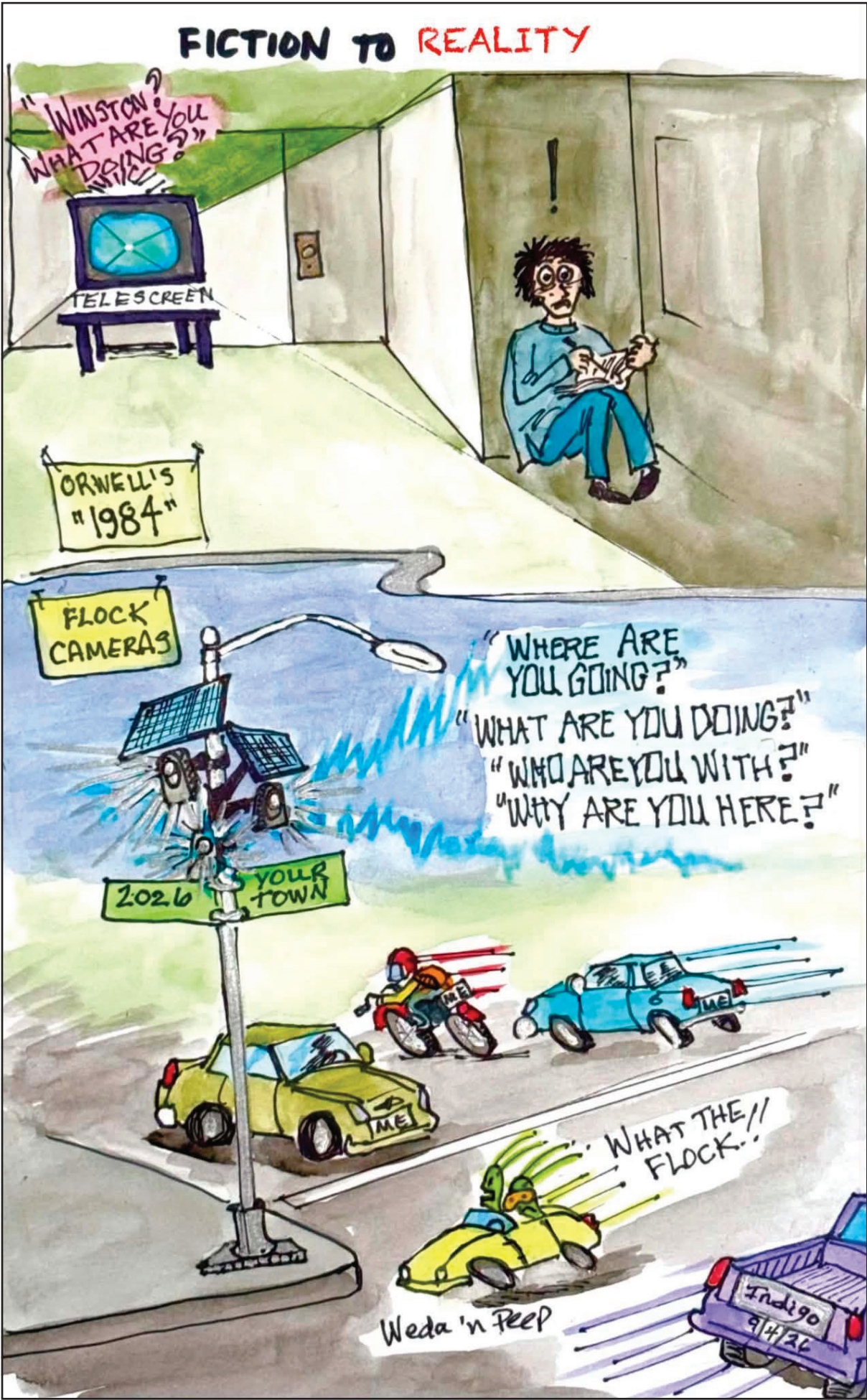
That is no longer simply a photograph. It is a map of a person’s life.

The fact that the camera is placed near a public road does not eliminate every constitutional concern. The Fourth Amendment was written in response to broad government power to search people, homes, papers, and belongings based on general suspicion. The technology has changed, but the danger of indiscriminate government surveillance remains familiar.

Flock states that its system collects license-plate images, vehicle characteristics, timestamps, and camera locations rather than names, facial-recognition data, or biometric information. The company also describes access controls, search logging, and data-retention policies.

Those safeguards may be helpful, but policies are not the same as constitutional limits. A policy can be changed. An administrator can reinterpret it. A new contract can expand access. A data-sharing agreement can connect one agency’s system to another.

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offenses, traffic violations, civil disputes, immigration matters, political activity, or other conduct never mentioned when the cameras were approved.

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Once surveillance infrastructure exists, it is rarely left alone. Agencies seek to expand their budgets, administrators look for additional uses, and elected officials are often reluctant to dismantle a program identified with public safety. A system approved to locate stolen vehicles can gradually be extended to traffic enforcement, revenue collection, civil investigations, and other purposes never presented to the public at the outset. Each expansion may be defended as reasonable, but the cumulative result is a permanent surveillance network with ever-broadening authority.

Mapping the Watchers: The DeFlock Controversy

The debate has escalated beyond traffic poles and town halls into a battle over basic transparency. When the citizen-led initiative DeFlock began mapping the locations of public surveillance cameras, the backlash from industry proponents was immediate and telling.

This isn’t simply about solving crime anymore. It is about building an increasingly comprehensive picture of where vehicles travel, when they travel, and how artificial intelligence can connect those movements. If these cameras are installed in public spaces using taxpayer dollars, why shouldn’t the public know where they are? That is the question DeFlock is asking, and asking it, apparently, has led critics to label citizen mappers as security threats.

It is a question the surveillance industry appears increasingly uncomfortable answering. The most revealing part of the controversy is what it exposes about the mindset behind the technology: when someone maps surveillance cameras, the cameras aren’t questioned; the person documenting them is. This represents an extraordinary inversion. The debate shifts away from whether expanding surveillance deserves public scrutiny and toward whether the citizens demanding accountability are somehow the threat.

When Public Safety Becomes a Revenue Strategy

The concerns become even more serious when municipalities use surveillance technology not only to investigate serious crimes, but also to generate revenue through citations, fines, fees, and collection costs. A system promoted as a public-safety tool can gradually become a financial strategy. Once officials begin counting citations as income, the central question changes from “Does this make the public safer?” to “How much money can this system produce?”

That transformation is morally and constitutionally dangerous. Government exists to protect the public, administer justice, and preserve individual rights—not to treat citizens as sources of revenue. A municipality should never be financially rewarded for increasing the number of people it accuses, especially when automated cameras and plate readers may not establish who was driving, what actually happened, or whether a violation was intentional.

Revenue-based enforcement creates a conflict between public safety and financial gain. It can encourage officials to place cameras where they will generate the most citations rather than where they are most needed. It can also promote enforcement based on volume instead of accuracy, punish people who were not responsible for an alleged violation, and place the greatest burden on working families, elderly residents, and low-income citizens.

Many people pay questionable citations simply because fighting them requires time away from work, transportation, legal knowledge, or the ability to appear in court. When the cost of contesting an accusation exceeds the penalty itself, the system rewards payment rather than truth. Additional fees, collection costs, license suspensions, and court expenses can turn one disputed notice into a cycle of financial hardship.

Such systems also risk undermining the presumption of innocence. Instead of the government proving a violation through reliable evidence, the citizen may receive a demand for payment and then be forced to

prove why the government’s record is wrong. That reverses the proper relationship between the people and the state.

From a moral standpoint, using public authority to maximize revenue is especially troubling. The Ten Commandments condemn stealing, bearing false witness, coveting, and oppression. Government does not escape those principles simply because money is collected through a legal notice. Legal authority alone does not make every use of that authority just. Enforcement must also be honest, proportionate, transparent, and directed toward a legitimate public purpose.

A system that turns alleged wrongdoing into projected income creates a built-in temptation to expand accusations, reduce meaningful review, and resist reforms that would reduce collections. What begins as a tool to locate stolen vehicles may eventually be used for traffic enforcement, parking violations, debt collection, civil penalties, or other purposes never clearly disclosed to the public.

Citizens therefore have a right to know how these systems are funded and operated. Municipalities should disclose the cost of the cameras, the amount collected through fines and fees, payments made to private vendors, the number of notices issued and dismissed, the number sent to collections, and where the money ultimately goes. A program described as a public-safety measure should demonstrate measurable safety benefits—not merely financial returns.

Public safety must never become a blank check for revenue collection. Municipalities should not design surveillance programs around revenue projections or reward agencies based on the number of citations generated. Any penalties should be incidental to a legitimate public-safety purpose, not the reason the system exists. No person should be fined or subjected to additional punishment based solely on an automated record that fails to establish identity, responsibility, intent, and an actual violation.

When government turns surveillance into revenue extraction, it does more than threaten privacy. It corrupts the purpose of law, burdens the innocent, weakens due process, damages public trust, and teaches officials to measure justice in dollars collected. Government authority is supposed to serve the people—not monetize them.

Technology may assist human judgment. It must not replace it.

When government turns surveillance into revenue extraction, it does more than threaten privacy. It corrupts the purpose of law, burdens the innocent, weakens due process, encourages mission creep, and teaches officials to measure justice in dollars collected. That is abhorrent because government authority is supposed to serve the people—not monetize them.

Once surveillance is tied to revenue, the slogan “If You Have Done Nothing Wrong, You Have Nothing to Fear” becomes even more dangerous. The issue is no longer merely whether the government is watching innocent people. It is whether the government is watching them in order to create accusations, impose penalties, and collect money. That reverses the proper relationship between citizens and the state.

“If You Have Done Nothing Wrong, You Have Nothing to Fear”

The familiar slogan that innocent people have nothing to fear from surveillance reverses the proper relationship between citizens and government. The American principle is not that citizens must prove they are harmless before government leaves them alone. The principle is that government must have lawful justification before it intrudes upon a person’s liberty.

The presumption of innocence means that a person is treated as innocent unless and until the government proves guilt through lawful procedures. Due process requires more than an accusation. It requires notice, a meaningful opportunity to be heard, an impartial decision-maker, and reliable evidence. A Flock camera does not prove who was driving. It does not establish why a vehicle was present. It does not prove what happened before or after the photograph was taken. It does not establish criminal intent.

A license plate can be misread. A character can be altered. A vehicle can be borrowed, rented, sold, or stolen. A family member may

be driving. A car may be near a crime scene without being involved in the crime. A camera’s location or timestamp may be inaccurate or incomplete. An image may create an appearance of certainty while leaving the most important questions unanswered. A camera record may be a useful investigative lead. It should not be treated as a conviction.

Evidence Must Still Be Tested

There is a serious difference between using a camera image as one piece of corroborating evidence and treating a database entry as if it were an all-knowing witness. A Flock record cannot explain why a vehicle was present. It cannot describe what a person saw or intended. It cannot be cross-examined. It cannot distinguish between presence and participation.

The Sixth Amendment protects the accused’s right to confront the witnesses against him and to receive a public trial before an impartial jury. Digital records may be admitted under certain evidentiary rules, but admissibility is not the same as reliability, completeness, or proof beyond a reasonable doubt.

Even Flock’s own materials emphasize that its systems are intended to generate investigative leads and that alerts should be verified by a human being before action is taken. That distinction matters. If human verification is necessary before officials act, then a camera alert should never be treated as conclusive proof by itself.

The proper rule should be simple: A Flock camera may generate a lead, but it should not, standing alone, establish identity, criminal conduct, probable cause, or guilt. That concern becomes especially important when a citizen is stopped, cited, arrested, or prosecuted based primarily on a camera image or an officer’s interpretation of that image.

The Mark French Case: When Government Evidence Goes Unchallenged

The danger of treating surveillance as proof does not end with the camera or database. It continues when the government uses a technological lead—or an officer’s interpretation of that lead—as the basis for accusing a citizen.

That concern is illustrated by Mark French’s challenge to a misdemeanor traffic case in Sanders County, Montana. According to the filings, French disputed several procedural matters, including the transfer of the Justice Court record, the nature of the District Court proceeding, judicial substitution, trial scheduling, filing fees, and the evidence against him.

French argued that the District Court proceeding should have been a *trial de novo*—a new trial rather than a review of the earlier proceeding—and that he was entitled to a jury trial and the opportunity to substitute the judge. According to the filings, both requests were denied.

The State’s response relied in part on Montana Code Annotated § 26-1-301, which allows a single witness’s testimony to establish a fact if the fact-finder considers that witness credible. But legal admissibility is not the same as reliability, completeness, or conclusive proof. A single witness may be legally sufficient, yet the testimony must still be carefully examined and weighed by an impartial fact-finder.

The government retains the burden of proof. A citizen should not be treated as guilty simply because an officer’s account is presumed more trustworthy—or because the government possesses a camera image, database entry, or computer-generated alert.

Those concerns become even more significant when technology is involved. A camera may record a vehicle without identifying the driver. A database may identify a license plate without establishing intent or proving that a violation occurred. Ultimately, the accusation may still depend on an officer’s interpretation of incomplete information.

The issue is not whether officers are always dishonest. Most may sincerely believe what they report. The issue is whether one government witness—or one unverified technological record—should be allowed to outweigh a citizen’s liberty without meaningful scrutiny. Due process requires more than an accusation. It requires a fair opportunity to challenge the evidence, question the technology, examine

