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The Casino Surveillance Mystique

By

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What is the origin of the fabled casino “eye in the sky”? It goes back to the early days in Nevada whereby casino owners wanted to protect their live cash flowing across gaming tables between employee dealers and casino players. They would create places in the casino ceiling with one-way glass and peer down from above to see if they were being cheated, or not. Later, as the casino gaming industry grew ever larger, casino executives and pit bosses assumed the surveillance oversight role and were supplemented by former law enforcement officers skilled in detecting illegal behavior. They were monitoring the feeds from security cameras into the “Surveillance Room” located in every modern day casino. To get better angles they would roam catwalks above the casino known to all in the business as “the eye in the sky.”

At one time casino security cameras were very costly involving an investment of \$10,000+ for a “pan, tilt, and zoom” security camera housed in a large dome on the casino ceiling. These cameras were touted as being so accurate that they could read the fine print on your wrist watch. Prior to today’s digital color cameras, surveillance operators were photographing activities in black and white. Thus, casino gaming chips had different markings on the edges identifying the value of the chip in play.

Today, security camera technology has made great strides. Tiny cameras are now digital with amazing color clarity. Their costs have plummeted way downward so much so that just about every commercial establishment has them. That includes many homes such as my own and probably yours. It is a fact that some casinos such as The Borgata in Atlantic City have thousands of them (2,500 to be exact). That is the good news. Unfortunately, in reality, as evidenced by the empty chairs in the above photograph of a casino surveillance room there are far too few qualified operators employed to view surveillance monitors.

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As an example, in a casino stalking, rape-murder case we handled in an Atlantic City Boardwalk casino (Fox v Resorts) we found that their official staffing complement of casino surveillance operators was eight and three of them were vacant and left unfilled in the middle of the summer high-season. The doer is still on the run. One of our key associates, a retired Director of Surveillance from the world's largest casino company and a former Chief Inspector of the Detective Bureau in a major U.S. city, maintains that a surveillance operator cannot successfully monitor more than 100 security cameras even with multiple split screens and sophisticated switching gear.

Professional surveillance and security is costly. Unfortunately, today many casinos "cut corners" on this very important protective function rather than pay for reasonable security and surveillance programs in the face of high-risk in their dangerous casino hotel properties. At one time the standard industry practice was to budget between 2% and 3% of casino revenues for this important coverage. In this day and age of greed and "willful ignorance" of foreseeable risk it is rare to find a casino spending more than 1% on their combined security and surveillance expense line.

Although you know that casino hotels have a duty to provide reasonable security to protect lawful business guests you should be shocked to learn how too few surveillance operators were on duty at a given event/incident and their lack of appropriate security/law enforcement credentials to perform their protection duties. That is why it is very important to get the daily assignment sheets and credentials of security and surveillance personnel on duty at the date and time of the incident before you. It may also help prove a novel new concept of "Abatement of Security" leading to successful case outcomes. (Binns v Harrah's)

At times this penny-pinching shortsightedness by casino hotels can be very costly. For example, how could the recent Mandalay Bay shooter bring twenty-three long guns, some with scopes and tripods to his casino hotel room along with thousands of rounds of heavy ammunition without being seen? Mass-murderer Paddock probably had a better surveillance system than his hosts in that he reportedly wired up the hotel hallway, his hotel door peep-hole and even a hotel service cart with cameras of his own. Sadly, it is also likely that the killer was paying more attention to his security cameras than Mandalay Bay's security and surveillance dummies were to theirs on that horrific day.

So, there you have it when it comes to bursting the bubble of "*The Casino Surveillance Mystique*." Simply put, no one is watching. Bet on it!

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