

# Homeland Security's Space-Based Spies

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[Antifascist Calling...](#) 5 June 2008

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## [Antifascist Calling...](#)

When [The Wall Street Journal](#) broke a story last August on the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) decision to provide state and local authorities access to information gathered by the U.S. military's fleet of spy satellites, it ignited a minor firestorm in Congress.

The National Applications Office (NAO) according to published reports, would coordinate how domestic law enforcement and "disaster relief" agencies such as FEMA utilize imagery intelligence ([IMINT](#)) generated by U.S. spy satellites. But as with other Bushist "security" schemes there's little in the way of "oversight" and zero concern for the rights of the American people.

Indeed, in a scathing [letter](#) from House Homeland Security Committee chairman, Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) to DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff, Thompson wrote,

Unfortunately, I have had to rely on media reports to gain information about this endeavor because neither I nor my staff was briefed on the decision to create this new office prior to the public disclosure of this effort. ...

I am also concerned about the Department's failure to vet this program with the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board, which was specifically created to ensure that concerns with respect to privacy and civil liberties are appropriately considered in the implementation of executive branch policies related to protecting the Nation against terrorism. The failure to consult the Board on a matter as controversial as using spy satellites for domestic homeland security and law enforcement purposes is particularly worrisome.

Worrisome perhaps, but standard operating procedure for the corporatist gang setting "homeland" security policy in Washington: "You don't ask, we don't tell, comprende?"

The ACLU weighed in last September when Barry Steinhardt, Director of the Technology and Liberty Project in testimony before the House Homeland Security Committee [stated](#):

"Congress needs to act before this potentially powerful surveillance tool is turned inward upon the American people. The domestic use of spy satellites represents a potential monster in the making, and we need to put some restraints in place before it grows into something that will trample Americans' privacy rights."

The program, originally slated to “go live” October 1, 2007, had been delayed by DHS’s refusal to address concerns raised by congressional and civil liberties critics over the NAO’s legal basis, not to mention its potential for abuse. But those misgivings have apparently been jettisoned out of the proverbial airlock.

[The Washington Post](#) reported April 12, “The Bush administration said yesterday that it plans to start using the nation’s most advanced spy technology for domestic purposes soon, rebuffing challenges by House Democrats over the idea’s legal authority.”

But during the September hearing cited above, Jane Harman (D-CA), the architect of the Orwellian “Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act of 2007” ([H.R. 1955](#)), certainly no slouch when it comes to expanding repressive state power said: “It will terrify you if you really understand the capabilities of [military] satellites.”

Citing criticism raised by Thompson and Harman, Chertoff claimed,

“There is no basis to suggest that this process is in any way insufficient to protect the privacy and civil liberties of Americans,” Chertoff wrote to Reps. Bennie G. Thompson (D-Miss.) and Jane Harman (D-Calif.), chairmen of the House Homeland Security Committee and its intelligence subcommittee, respectively, in letters released yesterday.

“I think we’ve fully addressed anybody’s concerns,” Chertoff added in remarks last week to bloggers. “I think the way is now clear to stand it up and go warm on it.” (Spencer S. Hsu, “Administration Set to Use New Spy Program in U.S.,” [The Washington Post](#), April 12, 2008)

Why are these “assets” so terrifying?

Unlike commercial satellites that beam TV programs, forecast the weather or provide global positioning services, their military cousins are far more flexible, have greater resolution and therefore, more power to monitor human activity. By utilizing different parts of the light- and infrared spectrum, spy satellites, in addition to taking ultra high-resolution photographs to within a *meter* of their “target,” can also track the heat signatures generated by people inside a building.

Perfectly suited for handing local SWAT teams “actionable intelligence” to bust up a meeting by antiwar, union or environmental activists, we have no criteria for assessing how the use of IMINT by “law enforcement” will impact our lives since DHS won’t say. Considering that the full-capabilities of these systems are unknown outside the intelligence “community” and are among the most closely-guarded state secrets, only those inside NAO will actually know who is being monitored from space.

Simply put, if Chertoff’s plan passes congressional muster NAO will greatly enhance the formidable technological police state architecture already in place through current “warrantless wiretapping” and data mining programs. As it stands, use of imagery and geospatial intelligence is limited to scientific agencies with zero responsibility for “homeland” security or law enforcement. Why these capabilities couldn’t continue to be used for legitimate scientific purposes—or disaster assessment, for that matter—have not been addressed by Chertoff and his minions.

But perhaps, other, more pressing “commercial concerns” are being catered to here. As investigative journalist Tim Shorrock [wrote](#),

The NAO was created under a plan tentatively approved in May 2007 by Director of National Intelligence Michael McConnell. Specifically, the NAO will oversee how classified information collected by the National Security Agency (NSA), the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) and other key agencies is used within the U.S. during natural disasters, terrorist attacks and other events affecting national security. The most critical intelligence will be supplied by the NSA and the NGA, which are often referred to by U.S. officials as the “eyes” and “ears” of the intelligence community. ...

The study group that established policies for the NAO was jointly funded by the ODNI and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), one of only two domestic U.S. agencies that is currently allowed, under rules set in the 1970s, to use classified intelligence from spy satellites. (The other is NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.) The group was chaired by Keith Hall, a Booz Allen vice president who manages his firm’s extensive contracts with the NGA and previously served as the director of the NRO.

Other members of the group included seven other former intelligence officers working for Booz Allen, as well as retired Army Lieutenant General Patrick M. Hughes, the former director of the DIA and vice president of homeland security for L-3 Communications, a key NSA contractor; and Thomas W. Conroy, the vice president of national security programs for Northrop Grumman, which has extensive contracts with the NSA and the NGA and throughout the intelligence community.

From the start, the study group was heavily weighted toward companies with a stake in both foreign and domestic intelligence. Not surprisingly, its contractor-advisers called for a major expansion in the domestic use of the spy satellites that they sell to the government. Since the end of the Cold War and particularly since the September 11, 2001 attacks, they said, the “threats to the nation have changed and there is a growing interest in making available the special capabilities of the intelligence community to all parts of the government, to include homeland security and law enforcement entities and on a higher priority basis.” (“Domestic Spying, Inc.,” CorpWatch, November 27, 2007)

As is readily apparent the problem here, as with nearly all of the Bush administration’s “counterterrorist” schemes since 9/11, is that NAO will largely be a creature operated and managed—at a steep price—by defense, intelligence and security privateers.

According to [Washington Technology’s](#) “2008 Top Government IT Contractors,” The Boeing Company clocks in at No. 2, with \$9,706,621,413; No. 3, Northrop Grumman Corporation at \$7,914,924,473; No. 5, SAIC, at \$4,919,829,998; No. 8, L-3 Communications Corporation at \$3,944,840,524; No. 12, BAE Systems, the third largest military contractor in the world, at \$2,019,931,520.

However you spread the taxpayer-generated grease around, it adds up to one giant incentive to see NAO “go warm,” as Chertoff colorfully explained in April. But as Alice Lipowicz [wrote](#),

*Satellite communications and intelligence activities are a major source of federal contracting activity, and expansion of those programs into homeland security and law enforcement is*

*likely to lead to greater contracting support. Information was not immediately available on the proposed budget for the National Applications Office for fiscal 2009 and beyond. ("CRS: Satellite surveillance raises privacy questions," Washington Technology, April 1, 2008)*

We can only imagine how, under the stewardship of opaque corporations answerable to no one but their boards of directors, NAO would greatly enhance the corporatist "growth potential" into the ever-more lucrative "homeland security" market!

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