

Obama's 'Independent' NSA Review Board staffed with Administration Insiders

By [RT](#)

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President Barack Obama said in August that an independent panel will review the United States' surveillance capabilities in the wake of damaging NSA leaks. One month later, though, that group's game plan is being called into question.

A steady stream of disclosures credited to former intelligence contractor Edward Snowden have revealed since June previously unreported details about the National Security Agency and the vast surveillance apparatus operated by the US government. Reports of those leaks in the media have made lawmakers on both sides of the aisle question the nation's intelligence gathering operations in the months since, and politicians and the public alike have asked for reform as a result of Snowden's disclosures.

Among the most significant results — seemingly, at least — came in early August when Pres. [Obama said](#) he was tasking an *"independent group to step back and review our capabilities — particularly our surveillance technologies."*

The agency would consider for the White House ways the administration can *"maintain the trust of the people," "make sure that there absolutely is no abuse in terms of how these surveillance technologies are used" and "ask how surveillance impacts our foreign policy, particularly in an age when more and more information is becoming public,"* the president said.

However, Stephen Braun wrote for the Associated Press over the weekend that the review board established after that Aug. 9 address is raising almost as many questions as the NSA operations they were put together to investigate.

"But with just weeks remaining before its first deadline to report back to the White House, the review panel has effectively been operating as an arm of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which oversees the NSA and all other US spy efforts," Braun wrote.

This, of course, after the president went on the record to establish a so-called independent review board, only to in turn place DNI James Clapper at its forefront.

Following initial reports that Clapper would guide the panel — aptly named the Director of National Intelligence Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technologies — the White House was quick to condemn those write-ups as [incorrect](#).

"The panel will not report to the DNI. As the DNI's statement yesterday made clear, the review group will brief its interim findings to the president within 60 days of its

establishment, and provide a final report with recommendations no later than December 15 2013,” national security council spokeswoman Caitlin Hayden told the Guardian last month.

“As we announced on Friday, the review group will be made up of independent, outside experts. The DNI’s role is one of facilitation, and the group is not under the direction of or led by the DNI,” Hayden said.

According to Braun though, the group isn’t exactly all that independent. From the AP:

“The panel’s advisers work in offices on loan from the DNI. Interview requests and press statements from the review panel are carefully coordinated through the DNI’s press office. James Clapper, the intelligence director, exempted the panel from U.S. rules that require federal committees to conduct their business and their meetings in ways the public can observe. Its final report, when it’s issued, will be submitted for White House approval before the public can read it.”

And as for those independent experts? Braun identified four of its five members as previous staffers in Democratic administrations, including a former Central Intelligence Agency Director and an ex-regulatory czar who served within the Obama White House. Another member, the University of Chicago’s Geoffrey Stone, wrote an op-ed in Huffington Post earlier this year defending the NSAs practices exposed by Snowden and the credibility of court established under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act to oversee those operations.

“It is important to note, though, that without the existence of a FISA court to which Executive Branch officials are answerable, there is little doubt that the NSA and the FBI would be authorizing all sorts of investigations that would not meet the standards now imposed by the FISA court,” Stone wrote. “In that sense, the existence of the FISA court plays a critical role.”

Before that, Braun wrote, Stone was an informal adviser to Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign.

“No one can look at this group and say it’s completely independent,” Sascha Meinrath, director of the Open Technology Institute, told Braun.

Glenn Greenwald, the Guardian writer who first reported on the Snowden leaks, said on Monday that the panel was *“a total farce.”* And when Tech Dirt’s Mike Masnick wrote about Obama’s Aug. 9 presser, he said, *“All in all this seems like a PR scramble by the an administration that realizes it’s on the losing side of the public debate.”* Weighing in on the latest news from the AP, Masnick updated his opinion of the panel on Monday to describe it now as *“a propaganda committee effectively overseen by James Clapper to talk up how awesome the surveillance state has become.”*

The review group’s interim findings will be sent to the president in early October. After the White House reviews them, a final report with recommendations is due to the administration no later than ten days before Christmas.

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