

Rendering the US a Police State Par Excellence ... George Orwell's Predictions Dwarfed

NSA Building Database of Every Call Made

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AP Headline: Paper Reports NSA Collecting Phone Records

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WASHINGTON (AP) —

Congressional Democrats demanded answers from the Bush administration Thursday about a report that the government secretly collected records of ordinary Americans' phone calls to build a database of every call made within the country.

"It is our government, it's not one party's government. It's America's government. Those entrusted with great power have a duty to answer to Americans what they are doing," said Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee.

AT&T, Verizon, and BellSouth telephone companies began turning over records of tens of millions of their customers' phone calls to the National Security Agency program shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, said USA Today, citing anonymous sources it said had direct knowledge of the arrangement.

The Republican chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Sen. Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, said he would call the phone companies to appear before the panel "to find out exactly what is going on."

The telephone companies on Thursday declined to comment on national security matters, and would say only that they are assisting government agencies in accordance with the law.

"We have been in full compliance with the law and we are committed to our customers' privacy," said Bob Varettoni, a spokesman for Verizon.

The White House defended its overall eavesdropping program and said no domestic surveillance is conducted without court approval.

"The intelligence activities undertaken by the United States government are lawful, necessary and required to protect Americans from terrorist attacks," said Dana Perino, the deputy White House press secretary, who added that appropriate members of Congress have been briefed on intelligence activities.

Leahy sounded incredulous about the latest report and railed against what he called a lack of congressional oversight. He argued that the media was doing the job of Congress.

“Are you telling me that tens of millions of Americans are involved with al Qaida?” Leahy asked. “These are tens of millions of Americans who are not suspected of anything ... Where does it stop?”

The Democrat, who at one point held up a copy of the newspaper, added: “Somebody ought to tell the truth and answer questions. They haven’t. The press has done our work for us and we should be ashamed. Shame on us for being so far behind and being so willing to rubber stamp anything this administration does. We ought to fold our tents.”

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said bringing the telephone companies before the Judiciary Committee is an important step.

“We need more. We need to take this seriously, more seriously than some other matters that might come before the committee because our privacy as American citizens is at stake,” Durbin said.

Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., argued that the program “is not a warrantless wiretapping of the American people. I don’t think this action is nearly as troublesome as being made out here, because they are not tapping our phones.”

The program does not involve listening to or taping the calls. Instead it documents who talks to whom in personal and business calls, whether local or long distance, by tracking which numbers are called, the newspaper said.

The NSA and the Office of National Intelligence Director did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

NSA is the same spy agency that conducts the controversial domestic eavesdropping program that has been acknowledged by President Bush. The president said last year that he authorized the NSA to listen, without warrants, to international phone calls involving Americans suspected of terrorist links.

The report came as the former NSA director, Gen. Michael Hayden – Bush’s choice to take over leadership of the CIA – had been scheduled to visit lawmakers on Capitol Hill Thursday. However, the meetings with Republican Sens. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska were postponed at the request of the White House, said congressional aides in the two Senate offices.

The White House offered no reason for the postponement to the lawmakers. Other meetings with lawmakers were still planned.

Hayden already faced criticism because of the NSA’s secret domestic eavesdropping program. As head of the NSA from March 1999 to April 2005, Hayden also would have overseen the call-tracking program.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., who has spoken favorably of the nomination, said the latest revelation “is also going to present a growing impediment to the confirmation of Gen. Hayden.”

The NSA wants the database of domestic call records to look for any patterns that might suggest terrorist activity, USA Today said.

Don Weber, a senior spokesman for the NSA, told the paper that the agency operates within the law, but would not comment further on its operations.

One big telecommunications company, Qwest, has refused to turn over records to the program, the newspaper said, because of privacy and legal concerns.

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Associated Press Writers Katherine Shrader and Elizabeth White in Washington and AP Business Writer Barbara Ortutay in New York contributed to this report.

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