

US spy chiefs defend wiretapping of foreign leaders, mass surveillance programs

By Barry Grey
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Appearing Tuesday before the Intelligence Committee of the House of Representatives, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and National Security Agency Director Gen. Keith Alexander defended the NSA's blanket surveillance programs, including its wiretapping of the heads of governments of US allies.

The intelligence chief's testimony came amidst a mounting international diplomatic crisis following revelations that the NSA tapped the cell phone of German Chancellor Angela Merkel for more than ten years, part of a surveillance program that also targeted at least 34 other government leaders. Trans-Atlantic tensions were compounded by reports that the NSA recently spied on 70 million telephone calls or text messages in France and 60 million in Spain in the space of one month.

The latest revelations of illegal mass spying by the United States, stemming from documents released by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, have prompted protests from US allies such as Germany, France and Spain as well as the European Union. A delegation from the European Parliament is already in Washington, meeting with American congressional and administration officials, and separate visits from German intelligence officials and EU representatives are in the offing.

The fallout from the diplomatic crisis within the American state and political establishment is spreading. The Obama administration and Democratic Party leaders have launched an effort to limit the political damage and distract the public from the essential issue in the spy program revelations—the exposure of flagrantly unconstitutional policies and the development of the apparatus of a police state in America.

The administration has told the press that Obama knew nothing of the bugging of Merkel and other government heads until last June, when an internal review of NSA programs ordered in the wake of the initial revelations by Snowden brought the practice to his attention. Obama reportedly suspended the programs at that time.

This story, which the president evidently told Merkel in a private conversation last week, has been contradicted by

unnamed current and former intelligence officials, who told the *Los Angeles Times* that long-standing protocols required that such information be made known to the State Department as well as the White House.

Administration officials denied a statement Monday by Senate Intelligence Committee Chairwoman Dianne Feinstein (Democrat of California) that White House officials had told her Obama would order a halt to intelligence collection in friendly countries. Instead, administration sources said Obama was merely considering curtailing spying on leaders of allied nations.

In a television interview Monday, the president broadly defended the NSA surveillance programs, saying, “The national security operations, generally, have one purpose and that is to make sure the American people are safe and that I'm making good decisions.” At the same time, he and other White House spokesmen have talked in vague terms of imposing restraints on the programs and making them more “transparent,” in order to win the trust and confidence of the American people.

As far as Obama and both big business parties are concerned—as well as the corporate-controlled media—the crisis does not arise from the destruction of democratic rights, but rather the exposure of the state conspiracy against those rights, and the growing anger of the population, which is deeply opposed to such police state measures.

The entire establishment is fearful of the further discrediting of the political system in the eyes of the people. The exposure of the bugging of friendly foreign leaders, in particular, makes all the more absurd the official mantra that mass spying on the populations of the US and the world is motivated by the desire to protect the American people from terrorist attack.

Tuesday's House Intelligence Committee hearing provided a demonstration of the bipartisan support of both big business parties for the military/intelligence agencies and the blanket spying programs that have been sanctioned by the White House and Congress. The hearing was jointly staged by the Republican chairman of the committee, Mike

Rogers of Michigan, and the ranking Democrat, Dutch Ruppersberger of Maryland, to provide a platform for Clapper and Alexander to defend their agencies and dismiss the massive evidence of their illegal activities.

Rogers set the tone in his opening statement, in which he declared: “Every nation collects foreign intelligence. That is not unique to the United States. What is unique to the United States is our level of oversight, our commitment to privacy protections, and our checks and balances on intelligence collection.”

Ruppersberger was, if anything, even more servile in his praise of the NSA. He began by saying he wanted to “thank the people of the intelligence community who work day and night to protect the security of our nation.” He continued: “With all the criticism leveled at these programs, it is important that we first not forget that these men and women are doing what we have told them to do, within the confines of the laws we’ve passed, and doing so to keep us safe.”

Simply ignoring the published evidence of NSA monitoring of the phone calls and emails of virtually every American, Ruppersberger stated, “Under FISA (the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act), NSA does not target Americans in the US and does not target Americans *anywhere* else, without a court order.”

He went on to assert that had the NSA in 2001 had its current mandate to collect information on every telephone call made in the US, the 9/11 attacks would have been stopped.

In their opening remarks, both Clapper and Alexander likewise raised the bloody shirt of 9/11, attempting to frighten the American people into accepting pervasive government snooping by claiming the alternative was more such tragedies. Clapper once again denounced the exposures of secret surveillance programs, claiming they undermined “lawful” efforts to “keep the country safe.” He added that in his 50 years in intelligence, he had never seen such “an unending array of threats to our way of life” as at present.

Alexander similarly offered a blanket defense of NSA surveillance operations. “We have shown we can both defend our country and protect our civil liberties,” he declared. He warned Congress not to “give up a program that would result in this nation being attacked.”

Both men defended the mass collection of telephone data and Internet communications, while professing support for cosmetic “reforms” to make the programs more “transparent.”

Chairman Rogers began the questioning by asking Clapper about spying on the US by foreign allies, which Clapper seized on to suggest that Washington was doing nothing out of the ordinary in tapping Merkel’s cell phone.

Alexander categorically rejected reports of mass US

spying on the communications of French and Spanish citizens, saying the reports were false.

Not one committee member from either party suggested that the programs were illegal or unconstitutional, that they should be halted, or that those officials responsible for them should be impeached or prosecuted. Democrats, in particular, went out of their way to declare their abiding respect for the NSA. The furthest they would go was to suggest that tapping the phones of friendly government leaders was causing damage to American diplomacy and the pursuit of US interests abroad.

Typical were the remarks of Representative Terri Sewell (Democrat of Alabama), who began by declaring her “utmost respect” for the intelligence agencies and professing a desire to “reform these programs, not dismantle them.”

No one mentioned Alexander’s statement in an interview posted by the Pentagon on YouTube last week that media reports on secret spying programs should be “stopped.” Instead, Rogers issued his own threat to the media, denouncing “very poor, inaccurate reporting” on the NSA and adding that this was “something we’re going to deal with here in the future.”

The hypocrisy of those officials who are attempting to carry out damage control is exemplified by Senate Intelligence Committee Chairwoman Feinstein. On Monday, she issued a statement complaining that she had not been “properly” informed of the surveillance of government leaders and declared her opposition to the practice.

She said her committee would launch a thorough review of all of the operations of the NSA.

Feinstein has vociferously defended all of the mass spying operations against the population. Less than two weeks ago, she published an op-ed piece in *USA Today* calling for a continuation of mass collection of telephone logs by the NSA, insisting the program was “not surveillance.”

She has led the way in witch-hunting whistleblowers, denouncing Snowden’s revelations last June as “an act of treason” and calling in 2010 for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to be prosecuted under the US Espionage Act.

The report to be issued by her committee on the results of its “top-down” review of NSA operations, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, will be classified.

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