

Bush Defends Phone Record Search

By Frank Main

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President Bush on Thursday defended the government's secret collection of billions of telephone records in the war against terror, but key Illinois Democrats called for congressional hearings into the program.

USA Today revealed the National Security Agency entered contracts with phone companies to assemble a massive database of numbers Americans have called since Sept. 11, 2001.

The newspaper quoted anonymous sources who said the NSA was not listening to conversations or recording them, but simply looking for calling patterns that might lead to terrorists.

Bush did not discuss details of the program but said, "We're not mining or trolling through the personal lives of millions of innocent Americans. Our efforts are focused on links to al-Qaida and their known affiliates."

The president said members of Congress, both Democrats and Republicans, were briefed on the intelligence activities he authorized.

Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin, who supported legislation earlier this year to outlaw the sale of phone calling records without a consumer's approval, said he wants to know more about the program. He called for the companies that have been reportedly providing records to the government -- AT&T, Verizon and BellSouth -- to appear before the Judiciary Committee.

"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.

The phone companies declined to comment, citing national security.

Reaction was mixed among key Republicans.

Sen. Trent Lott said he was briefed on the program. He said the United States needs "to use modern technological tools" to defeat terrorists.

But Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania said, "I am determined to get to the bottom of this," adding that he would subpoena phone companies if they refused to appear voluntarily.

"If the administration believes national security outweighs privacy concerns in this case, then the administration should welcome a complete review of the program by Congress," privacy expert Rob Douglas said.

More questions for CIA nominee

Because of Thursday's disclosure, Democrats promised to intensify their scrutiny of former NSA Director Michael Hayden, who was nominated this week by Bush to become CIA director.

Rep. Jan Schakowsky joined fellow Democrats on the Energy and Commerce Committee in asking Chairman Joe Barton (R-Texas) to schedule a hearing on the NSA program.

Schakowsky, of Evanston, said she also wants to know why legislation the committee approved to outlaw the sale of phone records was stalled by the House Intelligence Committee earlier this month.

Sources said the Intelligence Committee balked at the bill because it did not contain a specific exemption for intelligence agencies.

"If true, this raises important questions concerning whether intelligence agencies are seeking an exemption in order to obtain the phone records of Americans without due legal process," or if the agencies are trying to justify an NSA program "without clear legal authority," Rep. Edward Markey (D-Mass.) wrote to House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert of Illinois.

A similar Judiciary Committee bill that contained an exemption for intelligence agencies has passed the full House.

Brokers provide info to FBI

Earlier this month, the Chicago Sun-Times reported that information brokers under scrutiny by Congress for selling phone records have told investigators they provided such calling lists to the FBI and other law enforcement agencies.

An FBI spokesman acknowledged that the bureau is allowed to purchase personal information from such "resellers," but said the FBI does not violate laws or circumvent requirements to obtain warrants for personal information.

In January, the Sun-Times focused national attention on the issue of telephone privacy with a report that the FBI and Chicago Police were concerned their officers' calling lists could be purchased by criminals through online information brokers.

Congress drafted legislation to ban such sales of phone records, and Illinois and other states have sued information brokers, saying the calling lists they sell are often obtained by posing as a customer or telephone company employee.