

# US media, Democrats deflect opposition to government spying on Americans

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One day after the revelation that the National Security Agency has been secretly compiling a data base of the telephone calls of some 200 million Americans, the response from the media and both Democratic and Republican politicians already makes clear that there will be no serious opposition from within the political establishment to this further step in the direction of a police state.

On Friday, as General Michael Hayden, who presided over the NSA spying program as head of the agency from 1999 to 2005, made the rounds of Senate offices in advance of next week's confirmation hearings on his nomination to head the CIA, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, Democrat of Nevada, praised him as "a good man" and declared, "I have no problems with General Hayden going into the hearing."

Reid, along with other top Democrats in Congress, was well aware of the NSA's domestic spying program, having been briefed along with leading Republicans by the Bush administration.

As for the media, it did not take long after *USA Today* published its May 11 exposé on the spying operation for the networks and press to begin their efforts to confuse and disorient the American people and condition them to accept this unprecedented attack on democratic rights.

The *Washington Post* led the way, publishing as the lead article on its web site early Friday the results of an overnight poll conducted jointly by the *Post* and ABC News. The survey purported to show that 63 percent of Americans supported the NSA domestic spying operation that was authorized by President Bush shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Under the program, the three largest US telecommunications companies—AT&T, Verizon and BellSouth—are handing over to the NSA the records of

every telephone call made by every one of their customers, including the date, the duration of the call and the phone number dialed. This is being done without securing court warrants and without Congressional oversight, in flagrant violation of both the Fourth Amendment to the US Constitution and federal statutes.

The existence of the program exposes as lies previous statements made by Bush and Hayden, following last December's exposure of a secret NSA program to intercept and monitor international telephone calls and emails. At that time, Bush and Hayden said that the NSA was targeting only communications from or to countries outside the US and strictly limiting the spying to communications involving known terrorist suspects.

Beneath the headline "Poll: Most Americans Support NSA's Efforts," the *Post* said its poll also showed that 65 percent "of those interviewed" said it was "more important to investigate potential terrorist threats 'even if it intrudes on privacy.'" An even larger majority, 66 percent, said, according to the newspaper, they would "not be bothered if NSA collected records of personal calls they had made."

The Friday evening ABC News program featured the poll and presented it as definitive proof that a large majority of Americans supported the domestic spying. ABC News commentator, George Stephanopoulos, a former top political aide to Democratic President Bill Clinton, said the poll would convince Democrats to tone down their criticisms of both the NSA and Hayden.

Hayden was named Monday by Bush to succeed Porter J. Goss as head of the CIA. Stephanopoulos, echoing most other TV pundits, predicted that Hayden would be confirmed by the Senate.

NBC Nightly News also led its Friday broadcast with

the *Washington Post*-ABC News survey.

Both the *Washington Post*-ABC News poll and the uses to which it is being put are manipulative and cynical. It is, on its face, absurd to attribute any serious significance to a poll taken on the very day of the NSA program's exposure. The general population could not possibly have adequate time or information to assess the implications of such an unprecedented invasion of privacy rights, all the more so given the deliberate efforts of the mass media to play down its seriousness and conceal from the public the full scope of the spying operation.

There is, moreover, a thoroughly worked out and well tested modus operandi for conducting polls in such a way as to slant the result in a desired direction. The manner in which questions are posed, the order in which they are presented, the size and demographics of the polling sample, and the overall framework within which the questions are asked all play a major role in the ultimate result.

All of these issues come into play in the *Washington Post*-ABC News poll. In its report on the poll, the *Post* said it was conducted by telephone May 11 among a mere 502 "randomly selected adults." The newspaper felt obliged to issue its own caveat, writing: "The practical difficulties of doing a survey in a single evening represent other sources of error in this or any other overnight poll."

Why then, rush into print and broadcast the poll on the evening news as though it were authoritative?

All of the questions, as listed in the *Post*'s report on its poll, take uncritically as their premise the government's claim that the domestic spying operation is being conducted in order to protect the American people against potential terrorist attacks—a claim that is without any merit and is contradicted by the vast scope of the private information on ordinary Americans that is being collected.

One typically loaded question reads: "What do you think is more important now—for the federal government to investigate possible terrorist threats, even if it intrudes on personal privacy; or for the federal government not to intrude on personal privacy, even if that limits its ability to investigate possible terrorist threats?"

Even if one were to accept as valid the results of the poll, they would only underscore the pernicious role

played by the media in systematically misinforming the American people, concealing the vast implications of the government's police state measures, and working to deaden and subvert the democratic sensibilities of the population.

In any event, the *Washington Post*-ABC News poll is wildly at odds with other recent polls on the Bush administration's attacks on democratic rights. On the same day as the *Post* published its snap poll, *USA Today* cited a December 2005 poll showing that Americans "by more than two to one—65%-31%—said the government shouldn't take steps against terrorism that violate basic civil liberties."

The underlying political motivations behind the *Washington Post*-ABC News poll were reflected in the editorial comments of both the *Post* and the *New York Times*. Both newspapers criticized the NSA program as an invasion of privacy, the *Times* noting: "By cross-referencing phone numbers with databases that link numbers to names and addresses, the government could compile dossiers of what people and organizations each American is in contact with," and the *Post* calling it a "massive intrusion on personal privacy."

But both newspapers carefully avoided any call for the program to be halted, for any measures to be taken against Bush or other administration officials, or for General Hayden to be rejected by the Senate as the new CIA head. As the *Times* put it in its inimitable two-faced way: "The confirmation hearings of Michael Hayden, President Bush's nominee for Central Intelligence Agency director, are also a natural forum for a serious, thorough and pointed review of exactly what has been going on."

In the end, both newspapers called for the White House and Congress to collaborate in revising existing intelligence laws to vastly expand the legal powers of the government to spy on its citizens.



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