

US congressmen, complicit in NSA spying, posture as critics

Thomas Gaist
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During a hearing of the House Judiciary Committee last week, several lawmakers, including Representative James Sensenbrenner, Republican of Wisconsin, made a show of opposition to the National Security Agency surveillance programs.

Sensenbrenner, who sponsored the USA Patriot Act of October 2001, argued that should top officials fail to “rein in” their surveillance activities, they will lose Congressional approval for their programs. “You’re going to lose it entirely,” he said, referring to Section 215 of the Patriot Act, which grants sweeping surveillance powers to the state. “Unless you realize you’ve got a problem, that is not going to be renewed.”

“I think very clearly this program has gone off the tracks legally and needs to be reined in,” said Representative Zoe Lofgren, Democrat of California.

“The government is stockpiling sensitive personal data on a grand scale,” said Representative Ted Deutch, Democrat of Florida. “Intelligence officers, contractors and personnel only need a rubber-stamp warrant from the FISA court to then learn virtually everything there is to know about an American citizen,” he said, referring to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA).

The treatment of Edward Snowden by the American government and its leading representatives, of both major parties, illustrates the utter hypocrisy of these criticisms, which come after the police-state surveillance architecture has been fully deployed. After leaking information about the mass spying to the press, Edward Snowden has faced a tidal wave of bitter denunciations from the political establishment. He was branded a “traitor” and is now hunted to the ends of the earth.

Sensenbrenner himself said of Snowden at the time of the leaks, “Well, he’s definitely a criminal for violating

his oath and disgorging classified material. If he is giving this material to either the Chinese or the Russians, then he is a traitor. But we don’t know that yet. I think we will soon.”

Since the world first learned of Snowden five and a half weeks ago, the revelations of illegal and unconstitutional government activities have come one after the next. The courageous actions of the former NSA employee turned whistleblower have set off a crisis that has ripped what remains of the democratic veneer off the military-intelligence apparatus that runs the United States.

The lawmakers’ comments suggest that they were somehow kept in the dark as the vast surveillance infrastructure was erected. In fact, Congress was well-informed about these programs as they were developed.

Speaking to reporters on June 7, President Barack Obama affirmed as much when he said, “When it comes to telephone calls, every member of Congress has been briefed on this program. With respect to all these programs, the relevant intelligence committees are fully briefed on these programs.”

Faced with mounting anger against the spying, the political establishment is seeking to legitimize the surveillance architecture and render it more palatable to the public. The legislators supposed “shock” at the extent of the programs is aimed toward this end, as well as providing legal cover for themselves.

In truth, the Republicans and Democrats are both implicated in a bipartisan conspiracy, spanning at least the past decade, to establish the machinery of a police state in the US.

Whatever their nominal criticisms, no section of the political establishment has expressed any intent at action stopping the surveillance.

Senator Al Franken, Democrat of Minnesota, has similarly called for band-aid reforms of the surveillance system, saying in an interview, “I think that if there were greater transparency, Americans would have a better understanding of these programs.”

Along similar lines, major US corporations and NGOs including Apple, Google, Facebook, and Twitter have issued a letter calling for the government to publish information about the surveillance and enact new laws providing for “greater openness in the surveillance process.”

These same corporations have been fully integrated, over the past decade, into the military-intelligence apparatus. They are rightly concerned about the possibility of mass resistance against the emerging police state and are seeking a new legislative framework which will apply a facade of democracy and legality to the surveillance architecture.



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