

NSA does not deny spying on US Congress

Patrick Martin
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In a remarkable public declaration that there are no limits to government spying in America, the National Security Agency on Saturday refused to give any assurances that it is not conducting electronic surveillance on members of Congress.

The statement came in a brief email reply to a letter sent Friday by Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, an independent who caucuses with the Democrats. The letter cited a recent ruling by a federal district judge, who indicated that the NSA collection of telephone metadata on virtually every American violated the US Constitution and described the program as “almost Orwellian.”

Sanders asked General Keith Alexander, director of the NSA, what he described as “one very simple question.” He continued: “Has the NSA spied, or is the NSA currently spying, on members of Congress or other American elected officials?”

Sanders went on to define spying to include “gathering metadata on calls made from official or personal phones, content from web sites visited or emails sent, or collecting any other data from a third party not made available to the general public in the regular course of business.”

Since the Obama administration has already admitted, in the wake of the initial revelations by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, that the NSA collects metadata on essentially every phone call made in the United States, the only credible answer to the question Sanders posed is “yes.”

The NSA sought to obfuscate the issue, but only succeeded in confirming what the American people now know about the police state operations of the military-intelligence apparatus in the US. A statement from the NSA’s office of public affairs, sent to several media outlets that inquired about Sanders’ letter, reads as follows (in full):

“NSA’s authorities to collect signals intelligence data

include procedures that protect the privacy of US persons. Such protections are built into and cut across the entire process. Members of Congress have the same privacy protections as all US persons. NSA is fully committed to transparency with Congress. Our interaction with Congress has been extensive both before and since the media disclosures began last June. We are reviewing Sen. Sanders’s letter now, and we will continue to work to ensure that all Members of Congress, including Sen. Sanders, have information about NSA’s mission, authorities, and programs to fully inform the discharge of their duties.”

Assuming that there is no “mole” operating in the NSA press office, with a taste for ironic satire, the declaration that “Members of Congress have the same privacy protections as all US persons” should be read as a confirmation of the unlimited scope of the NSA’s spying operations.

Under the police state surveillance developed over the past decade, members of Congress and other American citizens have the same level of privacy protection: zero.

As the *Washington Post* observed on its web site: “The answer is telling. We already know that the NSA collects records on virtually every phone call made in the United States... If members of Congress are treated no differently than other Americans, then the NSA likely keeps tabs on every call they make as well.”

Moreover, as another commentator noted, this means that the NSA not only tramples on the Fourth Amendment protection against unreasonable and warrantless searches, it also violates the separation of powers that is fundamental to the US constitutional framework established in 1789.

It is worth recalling that there was a hue and cry in 2006 after FBI agents raided the congressional office of William Jefferson, a member of the House of Representatives from Louisiana, as part of an investigation into flagrant corruption. Members of

Congress in both parties denounced the unprecedented action by the FBI agents, who seized computer hard drives and other documents, as a breach of the separation of powers.

Now another arm of the executive branch tacitly admits to systematic surveillance of the communications of members of Congress, but it is unlikely that there will be any significant backlash on Capitol Hill.

It should also be pointed out that the wording of Sanders' letter was not limited to members of Congress. It asked whether "other American elected officials" were targeted, which would include not only members of state governments and local officials, but also officials of the federal government itself, up to and including the White House.

In one of his initial interviews, Edward Snowden declared that he could have monitored and read the private emails of President Obama if he had been given the email address. This claim was scoffed at by US government officials and media pundits. It now appears to be fully confirmed.

Whether Obama is himself a target of NSA spying, in addition to receiving NSA reports on the agency's spying on everyone else, remains unknown. But the response to Sanders' letter by the NSA confirms what the *World Socialist Web Site* has maintained since the Snowden revelations first surfaced: over the past decade, the scaffolding of a full-blown police state has been erected in the United States.



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