

Senate Armed Services Committee hearing promotes cyberwarfare and illegal spying

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On Tuesday the US Senate Armed Services Committee held a hearing examining the Obama administration's nominee to head the National Security Agency and the US Cyber Command, Vice Admiral Michael S. Rogers, who currently runs the Navy's Fleet Cyber Command.

Rogers' testimony centered largely on rehabilitating the public perception of the NSA, which has been exposed by whistleblower Edward Snowden for unconstitutional spying on virtually all US citizens, innumerable foreign nationals, and foreign heads of state. Throughout the hearing, the elephant in the room was the increasingly hostile American public. "Rebuilding trust," fixing the "PR issues," "increasing transparency," "accountability and oversight," participating in a "national dialogue" on the "tension between security and privacy," these were the watchwords of the day.

Senator John McCain of Arizona expressed great concern about recent polls showing favorable public attitudes toward Edward Snowden and asked the nominee what he might do to counter these opinions, adding that he thought Rogers should go on a speaking tour to promote a more positive image of the military intelligence apparatus if he is confirmed. McCain suggested that Rogers whip up fear in the public about alleged Iranian cyber attacks on a US Navy network.

Rogers agreed with McCain's absurd and self-serving claim that the special FISA court that hears requests for surveillance was not a rubber-stamp outfit, and provided sufficient oversight of spy agencies. He agreed with Senator Saxby Chambliss' insistence that legislation granting blanket civil liability immunity to telecom firms supplying data to the NSA was "critical."

Almost every single senator to question Rogers

expressed fear of contractors like Edward Snowden. Democratic Senator Joe Manchin went so far as to say that in his home state of West Virginia, Snowden was certainly not viewed as a hero.

South Carolina's arch-reactionary Lindsay Graham led the witness through a series of rehearsed questions and answers: Are we currently at war? YES. Could sections 215 and 702 of the PATRIOT act [those granting authority for bulk unwarranted phone and internet data collection] have prevented 9/11? YES. And Edward Snowden has aided the enemy? YES.

Virginia Senator Tim Kaine, a Democrat, suggested that the notion of war has become too vague, and the length and scope of the current war too broad. Nonetheless, Kaine voiced his agreement with the general framework of a police state under the euphemism of a "balance" of constitutional rights and national security.

The Cyber Command is the subdivision of the Pentagon in charge of both defensive and offensive operations involving telecommunications networks, falling under the US Strategic Command, headquartered at Offutt Air Force Base near Omaha, Nebraska. It currently has around 1,000 personnel at its headquarters in Fort Meade, Maryland, which shares space with the NSA. Cyber Command will have 1,800 personnel by the end of the year.

Last week, in testimony to the same committee, outgoing NSA director Keith Alexander urged the elevation of Cyber Command to "full combatant command status," that is, the equivalent of a command apparatus covering an entire continental region, like CENTCOM or AFRICOM.

Alexander requested that the new Cyber Command have certain special privileges such as independent budget authority as well as control over its curriculum

and training. These proposed changes would mirror the favored budgetary and training structures now enjoyed by the Special Operations Command (SoCom). Pentagon officials project that Cyber Command will have about 6,000 personnel by 2016.

Cyber Command was created in 2009, and its commander serves simultaneously as the director of the NSA.

The thread running through all of Tuesday's Senate Armed Services hearing was to streamline the already marginal (almost nonexistent) congressional oversight of the military intelligence apparatus, to expand the capacity of the US government to engage in cyber warfare, to shield violators of constitutional rights and other laws from accountability, and at the same time, to put a kindler, gentler face on the increasingly despised military-intelligence apparatus.



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