

CIA has been secretly collecting information on US citizens for decades

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The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has been running a secret program collecting information on US citizens for decades. The program was not known about by the US courts or Congress, the two branches of government responsible for oversight of the surveillance activity of the agency.

On Wednesday, a partially declassified letter from Democratic Party Senators Ron Wyden of Oregon and Martin Heinrich of New Mexico to CIA Director William Burns dated April 13, 2021, was released, showing that the secret surveillance program has been operated by the CIA under the authority of an executive order originally issued in 1981 during the Reagan Administration.

The letter from the two members of the Senate Intelligence Committee states that the CIA program has been conducted in defiance of congressional efforts that have been “expressed over many years and through multiple pieces of legislation, to limit and, in some cases, prohibit the warrantless collection of Americans’ records, as well as the public’s intense interest in and support for these legislative efforts.”

Furthermore, the senators say, the CIA’s secret bulk collection program has been operated “entirely outside the statutory framework that Congress, and the public believe govern this collection, and without any of the judicial, congressional or even executive branch oversight that comes with FISA collection,” and the nature of this operation “has been kept from the public and from Congress.”

FISA is the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978. FISA was passed following revelations of the CIA’s abuse of power and the targeting of US citizens for spying by the agency during the Watergate investigation of the Nixon administration. The law established the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court

and a secretive procedure by which law enforcement and intelligence agencies obtain approval for warrantless surveillance of alleged foreign spies within the US. Warrantless surveillance of US citizens is unconstitutional.

While the specific nature of the data being gathered and what the CIA has been doing with this information were redacted from their letter, the senators state that what the American public “deserves to know are the nature of the CIA’s relationship with its sources and the legal framework for the collection; the kind of records collected [passage redacted] the amount of Americans’ records maintained; and the rules governing the use, storage, dissemination and queries (including U.S. person queries) of the records.”

The senator’s letter explains that “the nature and full extent of the CIA’s collection was withheld even from the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence” until the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board’s (PCLOB) “Executive Order 12333 Central Intelligence Agency Deep Dive II” was issued in March 2021. Wyden and Heinrich then call on CIA Director Burns to declassify the “Deep Dive II” report as well as “the PCLOB’s two other EO 12333 reports.” The senators do not indicate what these two other reports are about.

According to a report in the *New York Times*, an anonymous intelligence official said the Senate Intelligence Committee did in fact know about the bulk data collection program of the CIA. However, the *Times* reported that the official said, “The Deep Dive II report instead focused on repository and analysis tools for storing and querying that data after its collection—systems the committee may not previously have been told about.”

The PCLOB was created by Congress in 2004 at the recommendation of the 9/11 Commission for the stated

purpose of establishing “an enhanced system of checks and balances to protect the precious liberties that are vital to our way of life.” However, the oversight board did nothing for ten years. The PCLOB issued its first report in January 2014, only after the previous year’s revelations by former intelligence analyst and whistleblower Edward Snowden about the global warrantless electronic surveillance activities of the NSA.

In response to the Snowden revelations, the US government claimed it was “scaling back” the NSA surveillance program with the modifications to the USA Freedom Act, signed into law by Barack Obama on June 2, 2015. While the corporate media and political establishment claimed that the NSA spying operations had been ended, the truth is that revisions were made to the FISA requirements while the bulk collection of electronic communications was left intact.

Meanwhile, as the latest revelations make clear, the querying, sifting through and analyzing of the 2015 authorized mass dragnet of data—including that of US citizens—has been carried out by the CIA under the authority of Executive Order 12333 without interruption all along.

Executive Order 12333 was signed by Ronald Reagan on December 4, 1981. It dramatically expanded the authority of the government to gather information “essential to the national security of the United States.” The 16-page executive order, which was modified and updated in 2004 and 2008 by the administration of George W. Bush, contains specific details about CIA information “collection techniques.”

The timeframe of four decades is significant in that it corresponds to the turn by the ruling elite to open class war policies driven by the decline of the US as an economic and industrial power. Beginning with the Reagan administration, the attacks on the living standards of the working class were accompanied by a resumption of militarism abroad and a growing assault on democratic rights at home. It is no accident that Executive Order 12333 was passed just four months after Reagan fired the PATCO air traffic controllers who went on strike on August 5, 1981.

The attack on democratic right was significantly deepened during the second Bush administration with the passage of the USA Patriot Act following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which were

used as a pretext to launch the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq.

Of course, electronic information of individuals—including smartphone voice calls, email messages, text messages, social media activity and locations data among them—has grown exponentially over the past twenty years. And so have the tools and methods of surveillance used by the US government to spy on everyone.



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