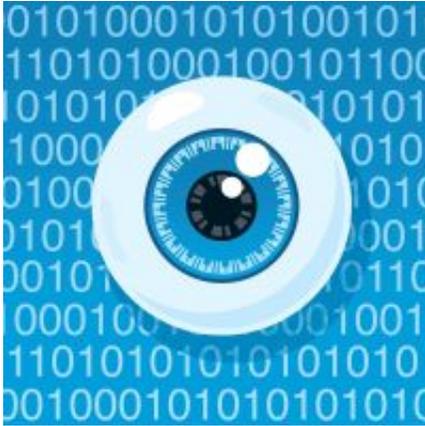


# Balboni: Don't let privacy trump security

January 22, 2014 by MICHAEL BALBONI



Ten years ago this July, the 9/11 Commission Report cited the failure of U.S. intelligence agencies to "connect the dots" leading to the terrorist attack -- the job the National Security Agency is charged to do. The ongoing discussion about privacy, security and the NSA's programs has been important and should continue. However, we must not compromise security programs that allow us the very freedom to openly engage in this debate.

President Barack Obama last week sought to reassure a cynical nation in the wake of the revelations by Edward Snowden, the federal contractor who leaked classified information to media outlets about how the United States collects intelligence. Reform of our intelligence operations has taken place over time, but usually as a result of failure or scandal: the Pearl Harbor attacks, the surveillance of civil rights leaders in the 1960s, and the 9/11 attacks.

Those events led to the overhaul of intelligence programs. However, we risk repeating the past: The changes were not designed to enhance the system's capability, and in the view of some experts, they have often curbed the effectiveness of our intelligence agencies.

The terms "signal intelligence," "cryptology" and "metadata" have crept into the lexicon of dinner-table conversation around America. But to many Americans, the NSA's mission is still largely misunderstood: The agency is charged with intercepting and analyzing electronic communications to respond to threats to the United States.

To address the nation's anxiety and that of our allies over our intelligence gathering, Obama has proposed a series of initiatives on metadata storage, surveillance of foreign leaders and their citizens, and the use of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court before the government gains access to collected data.

Obama made two points very clear: An extensive review of U.S. data-collection programs did not detect any systemic abuses, but threats to the United States remain very real.



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He also pushed back against world leaders who were "shocked" that America was listening to their conversations, but who did not admit their own efforts to listen in on the conversations of U.S.

leaders. Yet, he offered an olive branch to restore relations with our allies and said that our intelligence agencies would no longer direct their focus on those leaders.

His approach raises two vital questions: What assurances do we have that allies would not continue to spy on us, and if an NSA analyst hears a U.S. enemy speaking to one of our allies, does he or she only listen to half the conversation? Our national security is too important to have rules that parse detecting threats so finely.

The discussion over intelligence programs underscores the delicate balance between security and privacy. Americans are comfortable with posting some of our most intimate details on Facebook or Instagram or having Google maps with pictures of our backyards. Yet, when the government accesses the information, we suddenly find it disturbing. The irony is that there are few, if any, restrictions on how the private sector disseminates and uses our information.

We must remember that the transparency many Americans seek could provide our enemies with an advantage. Privacy concerns should not trump security interests, and the president is right to try to balance the two. But let's hope that in doing so, the government doesn't forget about its first duty: to protect us.

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