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Bush says he signed NSA wiretap order

Adds he OK'd program more than 30 times, will continue to do so

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- In acknowledging the message was true, President Bush took aim at the messenger Saturday, saying that a newspaper jeopardized national security by revealing that he authorized wiretaps on U.S. citizens after September 11.

After The New York Times reported, and CNN confirmed, a claim that Bush gave the National Security Agency license to eavesdrop on Americans communicating with people overseas, the president said that his actions were permissible, but that leaking the revelation to the media was illegal.

During an unusual live, on-camera version of his weekly radio address, Bush said such authorization is "fully consistent" with his "constitutional responsibilities and authorities." ([Watch Bush explain why he 'authorized the National Security Agency ... to intercept' -- 4:29](#))

Bush added: "Yesterday the existence of this secret program was revealed in media reports, after being improperly provided to news organizations. As a result, our enemies have learned information they should not have, and the unauthorized disclosure of this effort damages our national security and puts our citizens at risk."

He acknowledged during the address that he allowed the NSA "to intercept the international communications of people with known links to al Qaeda and related terrorist organizations."

The highly classified program was crucial to national security and designed "to detect and prevent terrorist attacks," he added. ([Transcript](#))

The NSA eavesdrops on billions of communications worldwide. Although the NSA is barred from domestic spying, it can get warrants issued with the permission of a special court called the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act Court.

The court is set up specifically to issue warrants allowing wiretapping on domestic soil.

'Sad day'

After hearing Bush's response, Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wisconsin, said there was no law allowing the president's actions and that "it's a sad day."

"He's trying to claim somehow that the authorization for the Afghanistan attack after 9/11 permitted this, and that's just absurd," Feingold said. "There's not a single senator or member of Congress who thought we were authorizing wiretaps."

He added that the law clearly lays out how to obtain permission for wiretaps.

"If he needs a wiretap, the authority is already there -- the Federal Intelligence Surveillance Act," Feingold said. "They can ask for a warrant to do that, and even if there's an emergency situation, they can go for 72 hours as long as they give notice at the end of 72 hours."

Bush defended signing the order by saying that two of the September 11 hijackers who flew the plane into the Pentagon -- Khalid Almihdhar and Nawaf Alhazmi -- "communicated while they were in the United States to other members of al Qaeda who were overseas, but we didn't know they were here until it was too late."

He said the authorizations have made it "more likely that killers like these 9/11 hijackers will be identified and located in time, and the activities conducted under this authorization have helped detect and prevent possible terrorist attacks in the United States and abroad."

Re-authorized 30 times

Sources with knowledge of the program told CNN on Friday that Bush signed the secret order in 2002. The sources refused to be identified because the program is classified.

Bush, however, said he authorized the program on several occasions since the September 11 attacks and that he plans on doing it again.

"I have re-authorized this program more than 30 times," he said. "I intend to do so for as long as our nation faces a continuing threat from al Qaeda and related groups."

The New York Times had not responded to Bush's allegations that the paper endangered national security as of Saturday afternoon.

But in a Friday statement, Executive Editor Bill Keller said the newspaper postponed publication of the article for a year at the White House's request, while editors pondered the national security issues surrounding the release of the information.

But after considering the legal and civil liberties aspects, and determining that the story could be written without jeopardizing intelligence operations, the paper ran the story, Keller said, emphasizing that information about many NSA eavesdropping operations is public record.

CNN has not confirmed the exact wording of the president's order.

The political ramifications of the newspaper's report were felt even before Bush acknowledged the report's veracity.

Senators contemplating a vote Friday on whether to renew some controversial portions of the Patriot Act used The New York Times' report as evidence that the government could not be trusted with the broad powers laid out in the act. ([Read about the Patriot Act vote](#))

In particular, Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pennsylvania, said such behavior by the executive branch "can't be condoned," and Sen. Charles Schumer, D-New York, said the report swayed his decision on the Patriot Act proposal.

"Today's revelation that the government listened in on thousands of phone conversations without getting a warrant is shocking and has greatly influenced my vote," Schumer said. "Today's revelation makes it very clear that we have to be very careful -- very careful."

Specter, the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, added Friday that his committee would immediately begin investigating the matter.

CNN's Kelli Arena contributed to this report.

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