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The out-of-control NSA

By Eugene Robinson

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Let's get this straight: The National Security Agency (NSA) snooped on the cellphone conversations of German Chancellor Angela Merkel? Perhaps for as long as a decade? And President Obama didn't know a thing about it?

Either somebody's lying or Obama needs to acknowledge that the NSA, in its quest for omniscience beyond anything Orwell could have imagined, is simply out of control.

The White House has not denied news reports — courtesy of disclosures by whistleblower Edward Snowden — that the spy agency eavesdropped on Merkel's phone calls. Press secretary Jay Carney said that “the United States is not monitoring and will not monitor the communications of the chancellor,” which sure sounds like an admission that such “monitoring” took place in the past.

This is a problem. Merkel is the de facto leader of Europe, which makes her, from the U.S. point of view, perhaps the most important allied leader in the world. Moreover, she and Obama have not only mutual respect but also a genuine rapport — or used to. Her government huffily demanded an explanation and said such spying “would be a serious breach of trust.”

But there's more: News organizations have reported that Merkel was one of about 35 world leaders whose private phone communications were intercepted by the NSA. The Wall Street

Journal said Obama was unaware of this eavesdropping until an internal administration review this summer.

How on earth could that be possible?

You'd think that Obama, having been given some strikingly intimate piece of intelligence about a foreign leader's thinking or intentions, would wonder how that information was gathered. It makes no sense that he would curb his curiosity in order to maintain "deniability," since any president is ultimately going to be held responsible for what his spies get caught doing.

But it also makes no sense that the NSA can decide on its own, with no adult supervision, to invade the privacy of even one leader of a sovereign state, let alone 35.

What did the agency do with the secrets it learned? Is the information still being stored? Are the foreign leaders in question — and we do not know who they are — supposed to believe that it's no problem if the NSA knows all about their personal conversations, just as Americans are supposed to believe it's acceptable that the agency keeps a record of all our phone calls?

But there's still more: On Monday, Spanish newspapers reported that the NSA compiled a detailed log of 60 million phone calls in Spain during a one-month period beginning last December. This follows similar reports of a one-month NSA sweep of phone data in France that reportedly captured 70 million calls. Spanish and French officials are also demanding an explanation.

The NSA does have its defenders. "I think the president should stop apologizing and stop being defensive," Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.) said on "Meet the Press," claiming that the spy agency's snooping "has saved thousands of lives, not just in the United States but also in France, in Germany and throughout Europe."

Besides, King said, "the French are someone to talk" because they routinely spy on the United States. And much of the planning for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks took place in Hamburg, under German officials' noses. And European countries sometimes have "dealings" with hostile countries such as Iran and North Korea.

That would be one way to look at it. Another would be that alienating key leaders — and broad public opinion — in friendly countries is a dumb, counterproductive way to fight terrorism. Following these revelations, are French, German and Spanish intelligence agencies likely to be more cooperative with their U.S. counterparts? Or less?

To me, all this is consistent with the NSA's apparent goal of knowing, basically, everything. The agency collects information as massively and indiscriminately as possible on the theory that if you assemble a database of all the world's communications, the few you seek — those involving terrorists — will be in there somewhere.

This is not just a massive invasion of privacy that the people of France, Spain and other countries understandably resent. It's also a mistake.

While NSA analysts were busy sifting billions of phone records, they were unaware that one of their own contract analysts, some guy named Snowden, was about to spill all the precious beans. Big Data will prove more of an illusion than a panacea. The agency will learn — not the hard way, I hope — that knowing everything unfortunately means knowing nothing at all.