

Necessary Secrecy

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Since our founding, the United States of America has needed secrets to protect her national security. Even today in the information age, with the Internet boom, and with appropriate demands for transparency, America still needs secrets.

In September 1776, General George Washington sent Captain Nathan Hale to secretly gather intelligence about the British forces in New York. When discovered by the British, Hale was executed as the first American spy and spoke his famous last words: "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country."

In June 1944, America and our allies had an important secret. Despite the massive movement of more than 150,000 Allied personnel at Normandy, France, the secret of a surprise invasion was kept and with a healthy dose of deception, misinformation, spies and double agents, the Germans believed the Allies would land hundreds of miles further up the French coast at Calais. The keeping of this secret was the beginning of the end of Hitler's Nazi regime and Allied victory in World War II.

And in May of 2011, the United States had another important secret. As President Obama stood in a room full of journalists at the White House Correspondent's dinner, only a select few people in the Administration, the CIA, the military, and the Congress knew that an operation was about to unfold that would have American special forces fly helicopters from Afghanistan into Pakistan undetected to raid Usama bin Laden's compound, resulting in the death of the leader of al Qa'ida. Keeping the secret was critical as the element of surprise was absolutely essential and the only way the operation could work.

Imagine if these examples first had to be litigated in open debate on the front page of the newspaper or on Twitter. In each case, these historic operations simply would not have succeeded and America's national security would have been seriously damaged. Instead, in each case, the American people were represented by their leaders to take critical action on their behalf to protect the nation.

The recent leaks of National Security Agency (NSA) intelligence collection programs have highlighted again an important aspect of America's representative democracy – the necessity of maintaining intelligence services, whose work is necessarily classified, inside a very open and transparent society to protect America's interests overseas and our way of life here at home.

The hard-working men and women in our intelligence agencies are very good at detecting the numerous threats facing our nation. They do this with a variety of creative and innovative tools and methods available to them under the law and within the bounds of the Constitution. When terrorists or foreign adversaries understand the sources and methods we use to find them and detect their plots, however, it is much easier for them to hide from us. If we could only explain these programs to the American people and not our adversaries, disclosure of all of America's intelligence programs would be possible. Unfortunately though, certainly in the information age, it is not.

The elected Members of the Congressional intelligence oversight committees, and control of the military and intelligence services by an elected, civilian President, serve as the connection between the arcane

business of intelligence and the American people. Through strong and effective oversight of the intelligence community, our charge is to ensure that the dedicated and vigilant intelligence professionals are working to keep America safe in a manner consistent with American values and who we are as a nation.

With unique access to the most sensitive activities of our government, the House and Senate Intelligence oversight committees are fundamentally watchdogs ensuring that intelligence abuses of year's past never happen again. Just as importantly, the oversight committees ensure that our intelligence agencies are doing everything they can to protect us, and that they are spending the taxpayer dollars in their classified budgets wisely.

In addition to the Congress, there is also oversight of U.S. intelligence programs by the Director of National Intelligence, the Department of Justice, each agency's Inspectors General, and the courts. These programs exemplify how America's Founding Fathers intended our system of checks and balances to work, with all three branches of government acting as a check on each other.

There is a natural tension between our open society and the need for the intelligence and secrets that help keep us safe. I believe we have found the right balance between protecting the American people from terrorists and hostile governments who wish us harm and protecting the fundamental rights the American people have fought for since our founding. Preserving our ability to keep national security secrets is an absolutely essential part of that effort.