

Watch this hand

The art of prestidigitation is based on the magician's ability to keep the eyes of the audience on the hand that performs the distraction, while the sleight of the hand that actually pulls off the trick can do so without detection.

It's no different in our present society—one that is either not paying attention, or is quite possibly eating up every piece of dung sent along the mainstream news sewer lines.

The latest trick was the flap between the administration, the National Security Agency, and three phone companies—AT&T, BellSouth, and Verizon—as to whether the NSA received upon request phone records of the telecommunications giants' customers.

AT&T didn't deny it.

BellSouth and Verizon issued the following statements.

BellSouth stated: "BellSouth does not provide any confidential customer information to the NSA or any governmental agency without proper legal authority."

What does that doublespeak mean?

It means that BellSouth might've coughed up the records since the NSA is perceived as having the "proper legal authority," e.g., the spymasters got what they asked for.

Verizon stated: "We do not comment on national security matters, we act in full compliance with the law and we are committed to safeguarding our customers' privacy."

We'll take that as a *yes* as to whether they gave up the goods as well since the NSA is most likely is in compliance with the law or, better yet, *is* the law.

Ah, but what a difference a few days makes.

BellSouth and Verizon suddenly changed their tune radically.

BellSouth issued this statement:

"As a result of media reports that BellSouth provided massive amounts of customer calling information under a contract with the NSA, the Company conducted an internal review to determine the facts. Based on our review to date, we have confirmed no such contract exists and we have not provided bulk customer calling records to the NSA."

Verizon responded even more strongly:

"One of the most glaring and repeated falsehoods in the media reporting is the assertion that, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Verizon was approached by NSA and entered into an arrangement to provide the NSA with data from its customers' domestic calls. This is false."

Who's lying?

Or does it matter?

And why wouldn't it matter?

Because the graver situation is that the NSA has been spying on United States citizens' phone calls. So who gives a hoot about the phone records? The government Droogies are listening to us when they choose, and all the justification that's needed is for the government to use the buzz words that make it okay: "It's to fight terrorism."

Baloney.

Have you forgotten this story from last December?

Probably.

It seems *The New York Times* reported then that President Bush secretly authorized the NSA to eavesdrop on Americans and others inside the United States.

CNN reported:

“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.”

You can bet that some of the Americans eavesdropped on were more than just those calling abroad.

For those who think it's alright to be spied upon because they “have nothing to hide,” be advised that—with the way things are going—simply exercising your right to dissent might someday give you “something to hide.”

As has been stated here before, borrowing a line from former Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, we are finding it more difficult every day to hang on to our “right to be left alone.”

But there's more to this security shell game.

CNET reported, May 3, that the “Federal Communications Commission voted unanimously to levy what likely will amount to wiretapping taxes on companies, municipalities and universities, saying it would create an incentive for them to keep costs down and that it was necessary to fight the war on terror.”

So while the distraction goes on about the NSA listening in on phone calls or requesting phone records, here's yet another government agency making straight the way toward backdooring computers and cyber communications—which, by the way, you can be sure is already happening.

And what's the justification?

“‘The first obligation is . . . the safety of the people,’ said FCC Commissioner Michael Copps, a Democrat. ‘This commission supports efforts to protect the public safety and homeland security of the United States and its people.’”

What a surprise? It's all about protecting us.

The article also added that “broadband providers and Internet phone companies will have to pick up the tab for the cost of building in mandatory wiretap access for police surveillance, federal regulators ruled Wednesday.”

That means *we* will wind up paying for it in a pass-along cost from Internet companies to the customers. So the days of free e-mail are coming to end.

Not only will our computers be spied upon, but we get to pay for our own surveillance. Isn't that special?

Terrorism is the excuse for every freedom-eroding action the government takes. If you want to get down to it then, terrorists could be everywhere, capable of doing everything.

This is giving far too much credit to any underground network-

Unless, that is, the terrorists are a very tightly run group that does its planning in the District of Criminals.