Return to HW

New Bug All Ears—Snoops Through Hung-Up Phone

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By Ronald Kessler
Washington Post Staff Writer

A breakthrough in electronic listening devices permitting any home or office to be bugged and tapped without entering it was disclosed by a wiretap expert at a conference of federal law enforcement and security investigators here yesterday.

The device can be placed anywhere on a line leading to the phone to be tapped — on telephone poles, in underground cable vaults, or in telephone company switching offices miles away. It picks up both telephone calls and conversations in the room where the phone is installed, even when the receiver is on the hook.

This feature, said government bugging experts who were queried yesterday, would make it unique.

According to Clyde Wallace, a bugging equipment manufacturer who disclosed the development, the device is already being used by two federal investigative agencies.

Wallace described the device at a symposium of the Association of Federal Investigators at the Mayflower Hotel. Others on the three-day agenda were officials of the Justice Department, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, and Treasury Department.

Spokesmen for the FBI and Central Intelligence Agency declined yesterday to comment on whether their agencies were the ones alluded to by Wallace in his speech as using the device.

The FBI has primary responsibility for court-approved wiretapping, which is interception of telephone calls, and bugging, which is monitoring of room conversations through electronic devices. The CIA conducts extensive electronic surveillance outside the U.S. but is not supposed to operate domestically unless the matter is related directly to its foreign intelligence work.

After his speech, Wallace expressed surprise and some dismay that a reporter had been present while he talked.

See BUG, C5, Col. 1

He declined to answer any questions on the new device.

During the speech, however, Wallace described it as the first method for simultaneously tapping a phone and bugging the room where it is installed without tampering with the phone or even going near the premises.

To tap and bug a phone, he said, the device is placed anywhere on the telephone line running to it. It then emits a radio frequency, which trips a switch in the phone. This switch normally prevents conversations in the room from traveling over the telephone wire. When it is bypassed by the signal, the phone becomes an open microphone, transmitting both room conversations and telephone calls to the listener.

Normal phone calls can be made while the device is in operation, according to Wallace, who said he is developing his own version of the device.

Last year, a cut-off switch was found by an electronics expert to be bypassed on the civil defense telephone in the office of Maryland Gov. Marvin Mandel, making the phone capable of transmitting conversations from Mandel's office. The telephone company attributed the situation to a wiring error.

Other devices, called infinity transmitters or "harmonica" bugs, can bug and tap phones simultaneously, but they all require physical entry to permit rewiring of the phone or installation of a bug.

Government bugging experts interviewed yesterday said no public mention had been made before of a device that would not require entry, and several expressed surprise at the development.

However, Bernard Fensterwald, former chief counsel of former Sen. Edward E. Long's Subcommittee on Administrative Practice and Procedure, which held extensive hearings on government surveillance, said he has had information for some time from nonpublic disclosures during the committee's investigation that security agencies, such as the CIA, use such a device.

Wallace earlier this year was investigated by the FBI to determine if any devices sold by the Spy Shop, which he owns, violate federal wiretap laws, according to FBI sources.

Wallace said he operates strictly within the confines of the law. The outcome of the FBI investigation could not be learned yesterday.

Asked about the propriety of an FBI official appearing on the same agenda with the target of an FBI probe, an FBI spokesman said the FBI representative appeared on a different day than did Wallace. Other than that, he said, the bureau would not comment.