

A2 Thursday, Oct. 30, 1975 THE WASHINGTON POST

NSA Intercepted Messages Of 1,600 Americans Abroad

By George Lardner Jr.

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The National Security Agency agreed to intercept the overseas communications of more than 1,600 Americans in a secret operation started in 1967 to counter domestic unrest and antiwar protests.

The monitoring of foreign cables and telephone calls, Project Minaret, gradually expanded to include suspected drug traffickers and potential assassins. It was abandoned in 1973 when then-attorney General Elliot L. Richardson found out about it.

In the first official, public account of the program, Lt. Gen. Lew Allen Jr. (USAF), director of the super-secret NSA, told the Senate intelligence committee yesterday that the surveillance was based on secret "watch lists" supplied by such agencies as the FBI, the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency.

After hearing from Allen for two hours, the committee bogged down in a debate over whether to disclose what Chairman Frank Church (D-Idaho) described as another "apparently illegal" NSA project that lasted many more years.

Dubbed "Project Shamrock," this operation started under President Truman and evidently included the secret inspection and copying of private international cables that was disclosed last week as the result of a House investigation headed by Rep. Bella Abzug (D-N.Y.).

The White House, it developed yesterday, is still opposed to releasing any further details. Allen was not permitted to testify about the operation, and Republican members of the committee objected strenuously to Church's proposal to make public a special report on it.

Sen. John G. Tower (R-Tex.), the ranking minority member, protested that "President Truman decided this matter should be kept secret," and that President Ford had specifically made a similar request.

Church said the project had been terminated and could safely be disclosed without compromising the national security or jeopardizing technological secrets.

He said the only executive branch argument was that



By James K.W. Atherton—The Washington Post

Lt. Gen. Lew Allen Jr., director of the National Security Agency, testifies before Senate Committee.

disclosure would "embarrass" the corporations involved and might make other companies "reluctant to cooperate" in the future.

Reports in The Washington Post and elsewhere disclosed last week that government agents, apparently including NSA officials, had regularly visited the Washington offices of RCA Global Communications, Inc., and ITT World Communications at odd hours to read and copy international cable traffic.

The dispute moved behind closed doors at a committee session yesterday afternoon, escalated into a debate over the committee's right to declassify government secrets on its own. Sen. Howard H. Baker (R-Tenn.) maintained that only the full Senate could take such a step.

At day's end, the issue remained unresolved. Church told reporters that the com-

mittee decided to send its proposed report on Project Shamrock to Allen to check its accuracy and "to see if anything in it would reveal NSA methods beyond what is already known and part of the public domain." After that the committee will vote on whether to release the report, Church said.

Declaring that Project Minaret also struck him as "illegal," Church said attorney general Edward H. Levi will be asked to testify about it next week.

Church suggested that the operation was only a short step removed from a presidential order to intercept "purely domestic messages" between Americans as vital to a proper understanding of foreign activities.

Allen acknowledged that NSA never obtained a written opinion on the legality of its spywork for other agencies,

including several primarily interested in domestic law enforcement.

But he said his predecessor, Adm. Noel Gayler, had reviewed it with then-Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird and Attorneys General John N. Mitchell and Richard G. Kleindienst.

Allen said the project, which also subjected nearly 6,000 foreign individuals and groups to special surveillance, produced approximately 3,900 reports over a seven-year period that were distributed to officials in the originating agencies on a "quite secret" basis.

The NSA, the hearing showed, has the capacity to pluck messages out of the air without using any "taps" or "bugs."

Sen. Walter F. Mondale (D-Minn.) said one of the messages intercepted was a request from a leading U.S. antiwar activist to a popular singer abroad asking for help with a proposed concert.

Allen maintained that the intercept was prompted by a "very specific" request and that it, like all the others, "had at least one foreign terminal."

While declining to give details, he said that "a major terrorist act" in a large U.S. city was headed off as a result of Project Minaret surveillance and that "some large drug shipments were prevented from entering the U.S."

The NSA originally informed the committee that the special spywork also helped thwart "an assassination attempt," but Allen said yesterday this was a result of regular surveillance of foreign communications, not of Project Minaret.

Under questioning by Mondale, NSA Deputy Director Benson Buffham said he "assumed" the watch lists handed the NSA would have increased substantially if President Nixon's approval of the so-called "Huston Plan" in 1970—calling for increased domestic surveillance—had not been rescinded.

"Were you concerned about its legality?" Mondale asked about the Huston Plan, which the NSA and other government intelligence agencies helped shape.

"That particular aspect didn't enter into the discussions," Buffham replied.