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Was President Trump spied on as part of Carter Page wiretapping?

By Sharyl Attkisson, opinion contributor — 03/02/20 09:30 AM EST
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The Department of Justice (DOJ) inspector general is busy conducting a comprehensive review of wiretaps touched by DOJ and FBI officials responsible for the [improper wiretapping](#) of former Trump campaign volunteer [Carter Page](#).

But little has been said about important, outstanding questions that theoretically impact thousands of U.S. citizens whose privacy may have been improperly or illegally invaded by the government.

In 2016 and 2017, there were [four government wiretaps](#) against Page, each reportedly lasting 90 days. The FBI's theory was that Page was a Russian agent, or imminently about to become one. A wiretap allows government agents to collect, listen to, read, rifle through and store emails, snail mail, phone calls, text messages, photographs, bank records — you name it. But under a little-known policy, the government allows itself to extend the collection of personal material far beyond the wiretapped target ... **to people “two hops” away from that person.**

What does this mean?

It means the government not only listened in on Carter Page, but also authorized itself to access highly personal communications of everyone who contacted Page (that's “one hop”) and, believe it or not, everybody who contacted those people (“two hops”), even if those folks never actually made direct contact with Carter Page himself.

In 2015, U.S. intelligence sources privately told me that rogue government officials sometimes used this latitude to reverse-engineer wiretap applications. **This means, said the officials, that government agents might wish to improperly spy on a certain U.S. citizen on whom they could not justify getting a wiretap. So they would look for easier marks surrounding that person, wiretap them, and capture the true, intended target through the one-hop-two-hop policy.**

One intel official told me at the time, “If you ever see the paper trail [for the reverse-engineered wiretaps] it will all look legitimate. There will be legal memos from the White House counsel's office justifying them. It's all worked out to hide that they are really going after somebody else.”

Naturally, this crossed my mind in 2016 when there were reports of government wiretaps against people affiliated with the Trump campaign. Unable to legitimately spy on Donald Trump himself, did intel officials search for people around him to wiretap, knowing they could sweep up Trump indirectly? Page could have been considered an easy target for a wiretap because he [had worked in Russia](#) for Merrill Lynch. The CIA and FBI knew of him well, because he had [assisted them](#) in previous Russia spy cases.

All of that is just speculation, at this point. But this much is not: With the DOJ and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court recently determining that at least **some of the wiretaps against Page were invalid, it means the government also invaded the privacy of a whole lot of other innocent Americans through those improper wiretaps.**

Who? And how many?

One [analysis](#) of the government's one-hop-two-hop practice concluded that intel agencies can exploit one legal wiretap to secretly access 25,000 people's phones.

The government should immediately produce the following information:

- The names of all Americans whose information was accessed or collected under the Page wiretap applications.
- The database of all of the material collected.
- The list of who accessed the material, when they accessed it, and with whom it was shared.
- Information about what has become of the material, how it is being stored, and whether or when it will be destroyed.

These concerns become exponential if there were more wiretaps besides those against Carter Page. According to press reports, other figures around Trump were also wiretapped, though this has never been publicly addressed by intel agencies or the DOJ's inspector general.

According to [CNN](#), CBS and other [media reports](#) in September 2017, the FBI wiretapped the former head of Trump's campaign, Paul Manafort, [after](#) Trump was elected. Manafort could have been another possible easy target as someone to wiretap surrounding Trump, because the FBI reportedly had wiretapped Manafort years earlier in a separate investigation in which he ultimately was not charged. Former Trump campaign adviser George Papadopoulos [has said](#) he believes he was surveilled. Trump associate [Roger Stone](#) also [reportedly](#) was [picked up](#) on wiretaps. Multiple Trump “transition officials” were [“incidentally” picked up](#) during government surveillance of a foreign official.

Considering the improprieties now flagged by the DOJ's inspector general, it is worth asking whether the “incidental” collection of U.S. citizens affiliated with the Trump campaign truly was accidental or, perhaps, by design.

And that leads us to the as yet unanswered questions about “unmaskings.”

Former Obama adviser Susan Rice reportedly admitted “[unmasking](#),” or asking to know the identities of, numerous Trump campaign officials whose communications had been “incidentally” captured by intel agencies. Those identities are supposed to be strictly protected for their own privacy. Near-daily [unmasking requests](#) were said to be made in 2016 under the name of then-United Nations Ambassador Samantha Power. Then-Director of National Intelligence [James Clapper](#) admitted he requested the unmasking of American names “every couple of weeks.” Both Clapper and then-acting Attorney General Sally Yates [said](#) they viewed classified documents in which “Mr. Trump, his associates, or members of Congress had been unmasked.” (All of the officials said their actions were in the interest of national security, and not to spy.)

One begins to wonder: Who wasn't getting spied on?

All of that spying, and [in the end](#), nobody was found to have had any improper associations with Russia.

But the biggest unanswered question may be this: Were any communications of candidate and then [President Trump](#) collected under the improper Page wiretaps?

As [improper behavior](#) of officials in our top law enforcement agency is being exposed, it appears we have only scratched the surface.

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