

[close window](#)

Privacy infringements worry local residents

By Erin Smith
esmith@journalandcourier.com

May 12, 2006

Knowledge that the federal government has been secretly collecting phone call records of Americans heightens the privacy concerns of some Lafayette-area citizens.

Mary Nauman of West Lafayette wonders what the government will do with the records.

But her biggest concern is that President Bush felt he didn't need to consult with Congress before tapping the information.

"I feel this is the beginning of an irretrievable path that we won't be able to return from -- that we just can't get back to unless we make a lot of noise now," she said.

Citing anonymous sources with direct knowledge, USA Today reported Thursday that AT&T Corp., Verizon Communications Inc. and BellSouth Corp. telephone companies began turning over records of tens of millions of their customers' phone calls to the National Security Agency shortly after Sept. 11, 2001.

Eugene H. Spafford, Purdue University professor and executive director of CERIAS, the Center for Education and Research in Information Assurance and Security, said there are two issues with collecting phone numbers.

Government officials could use the information to look at records of high-profile terrorism suspects, Spafford said, tracing domestic calls of those they contact and identifying other possible conspirators.

The problem is "that this kind of wide-scale collection appears to be questionable under the law and being done without congressional approval," Spafford said. "A secondary concern is that when you have all this information on individuals who have no connections to terrorism, you can also draw connections that would certainly be inappropriate from a legal standpoint."

Lafayette resident Jeremiah Kitchel said he approves of Bush's actions and the way he's handled the war in Iraq. He's not really bothered by news that the government is collecting phone records.

"We are at a time of war. I don't believe they're going to spend millions of dollars just to find out who's hanging out on a Friday night," he said.

"I don't have anything to hide."

Though the president has collected the data in secret, Kitchel believes government officials will use the

information to protect the country. But if phone records were accessed in a similar manner when the country was in a time of peace, Kitchel said that wouldn't be right.

Even though collecting phone numbers doesn't constitute a search, "We should be worried about that," said Will McLachlan, associate professor of political science at Purdue.

"They don't need to know that information unless they have some probable cause. ... You can't claim it on the grounds of national security."

McLachlan said Congress needs to "pull up their socks" and ask the executive branch to justify its need for this information.

Spafford, who advises the president and NSA on policy issues of security, agreed.

He said that a proper system of checks and balances within government needs to be in place. Similar information gathering has taken place for years, he said.

Hints of the current NSA program were revealed earlier this year when a San Francisco-based group devoted to preserving privacy in digital media filed a federal lawsuit, alleging AT&T Inc. had given the NSA direct access to records of the more than 300 million domestic and international calls.

Historically, Spafford said, agencies such as the NSA, FBI and CIA had done a good job in accessing and using collected information appropriately.

"The difficulty comes into play when there aren't strong limits in place."

--*Contributing: The Associated Press*