

The following Op-Ed by Congresswoman Anna G. Eshoo, and Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell, was published in the Wall Street Journal on Wednesday, April 2, 2008:

The Intelligence Consensus

By Anna G. Eshoo and Mike McConnell

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Recent reports in this paper and others allege the existence of broad intelligence programs run by the National Security Agency to process wide-ranging personal data on Americans' activities. One of us (Eshoo) sees this as the latest in a string of troubling accusations about the erosion of privacy and civil liberties since 9/11. The other (McConnell) sees it as more hyperbole and inaccurate press reports designed to mislead the public into thinking that the intelligence community is acting against American law and values. Honest people can differ on these tough issues. We think it is healthy. This is America, after all.

Despite our diverging opinions, it would be useful to set forth those areas where we agree, in hopes that our colleagues from the executive branch and the legislative branch – who have so often clashed on matters related to surveillance – can find common ground.

First, we both agree that America's intelligence efforts must adapt to evolving threats. Asymmetric threats, such as terrorism, cannot be defeated using conventional means. Stopping an adversary that hides its activities, blends into the local population, and moves easily across borders requires more than just overhearing what our adversaries are saying. It requires monitoring them, pursuant to a legal framework, understanding their appeal, and predicting and preventing their actions.

Second, the modern American intelligence community, born after World War II, was designed to counter Cold War threats. Today, data flows know no boundaries. Some global communications run through the United States, even if they are between Pakistan and Europe. Emails fly across the world at a rapid speed.

If we are going to ask our intelligence agencies to help defend our country, we need to carefully construct policies that give them access to this information when necessary, and protect the rights of Americans.

The National Security Agency, for example, is governed by strict rules that protect the information of U.S. citizens. It must apply protections to all of its foreign surveillance activities, regardless of the source. As we add new authorities and programs to secure our country, we must ensure appropriate safeguards and protections to secure our liberties. We must maintain the balance between safety and freedom.

Third, we need a first-rate, professional intelligence workforce. Too often, our country has invested in dazzling new technology as the solution to our intelligence woes. Technology is vitally important. But a computer is only as good as the person who programs it. No piece of technology can substitute human judgment. A computer – even one that costs millions – cannot recruit a spy. We must recruit, train and retain intelligence officers from diverse backgrounds, who speak the language of our adversaries and can blend into the world we seek to understand.

Fourth, our reliance on the Internet has made us more prosperous as a nation, but also more vulnerable. With so many of our communications and business transactions handled online, our adversaries can penetrate those networks and cause great disruption and harm. A cyber attack could be more devastating economically than Sept. 11. Preventing a cyber attack will require tremendous cooperation between the government and the private sector, and above all, a common understanding that our liberty and our security go hand in hand.

Finally, no cyber-security plan will succeed without congressional support. Checks and balances are essential in a democracy, particularly when the matter concerns secret government programs that rightly remain out of the public view. Active congressional oversight gives the public confidence that their rights and their security are being properly attended to, and such oversight allows Congress to say so confidently and publicly.

For foreign threat information, pursuant to a legal framework, the government must listen in. But in so doing, we should also listen to the voices of our founding fathers, who foresaw that a nation without freedom at home would be incapable of standing for freedom around the world. We need a professional and empowered intelligence community as well as effective congressional oversight to protect our nation. We are committed to both.

Ms. Eshoo is a subcommittee chair on the House Intelligence Committee. Mr. McConnell, a retired Navy vice admiral, was director of the National Security Agency from 1992-1996 and is currently the Director of National Intelligence.