



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on October 3, 2013

NSA Chief: Agency's Successes Are Being Overstated

In a Wednesday hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee, National Security Agency (NSA) Director Gen. Keith Alexander (shown) admitted that the Obama administration has been using misleading statistics in an effort to convince Americans that the NSA's enormous domestic surveillance programs have protected them from terrorist attacks.



Ever since former NSA contractor Edward Snowden revealed much of the NSA's snooping into Americans' lives, including the fact that the agency is vacuuming up "metadata" on every telephone call in the United States, the Obama administration has mounted a vigorous defense of the NSA and its unconstitutional programs. First, the administration denied various aspects of Snowden's revelations; such denials, however, have been [repeatedly met](#) with indisputable evidence that Snowden was telling the truth. Forced to concede that the NSA is indeed spying on Americans, the administration then fell back on the favored line of all totalitarians: Sure, we're making Big Brother look like a piker, but it's all about keeping Americans safe.

"We aren't trying to hide it," Alexander told the Senate Appropriations Committee in mid-June — news to Snowden, who was forced to [seek asylum in Russia](#) after the administration charged him with espionage. "We're trying to protect America."

At that time, according to the [New York Times](#), Alexander mounted "a robust defense of the phone program," claiming "that it had been critical in helping to prevent 'dozens of terrorist attacks' both in the United States and abroad." Later that month he came up with an exact figure: [54 terrorist plots](#), he said, had been foiled by the phone program.

On August 1, however, NSA Deputy Director [John Inglis](#) told the Senate Judiciary Committee that, in fact, the metadata collection program had contributed to the discovery of just 13 domestic terrorist plots and was only critical in thwarting a single plot. He also acknowledged that the 54 plots allegedly foiled by the phone program included those allegedly prevented by the agency's data-mining program, meaning that the administration was trying to make the phone program look more effective than it actually is.

Given the opportunity to grill Inglis' superior on October 2, Judiciary Committee Chairman Sen. [Patrick](#)



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[Leahy](#) (D-Vt.) made it clear that he was unhappy with the administration's continual trumpeting of "the assertion that 54 terrorist plots were thwarted by the use of" the bulk phone-records collection and data-mining programs.

"That's plainly wrong," Leahy said. "These weren't all plots, and they weren't all thwarted."

"The American people are getting left with an inaccurate impression of the effectiveness of the NSA program," he added.

Leahy asked Alexander if he agreed, and Alexander said, "Yes." Leahy also asked him if Inglis' testimony that the phone program had really prevented only one domestic terrorist attack was correct. Alexander said that it was.

"We're talking about massive, massive, massive collection" of data, Leahy said. "We're told we have to do that to protect us, and then statistics are rolled out. If they're not accurate, it doesn't help the credibility here in the Congress, it doesn't help the credibility with this chairman, and it doesn't help the credibility with the country."

The [Washington Times](#) reports that Leahy also expressed his frustration with the NSA's lack of transparency:

He added that details of the 54 cases, even those provided to lawmakers in special classified briefings, were "unconvincing."

"We get more from the newspapers than we do in the classified briefings that you give us," he told Gen. Alexander.

"And we get a crossword puzzle, too," he added.

Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, who in March [denied](#) that the NSA "wittingly" collects data on millions of Americans, told Leahy that the number of alleged agency successes in foiling terrorist plots "should not be the only metric by which the success of the [phone] program is measured," wrote the Times.

"I think there's another metric here that's very important," he said. "I would call it the peace-of-mind metric."

Clapper said he was referring to the peace of mind that NSA analysts could have if they discovered that terrorists were not planning to attack the United States.

But what about Americans' peace of mind? They, after all, are the ones whose every mouse click, e-mail, tweet, text message, and telephone conversation is being monitored by the federal government. How can they possibly have any peace of mind knowing that their private lives may at any moment be used against them or even be exposed to the entire world? And given that the NSA, by its own account, has foiled only one domestic terrorist plot while others, including [the Boston Marathon bombing and the Washington Navy Yard shooting](#), have escaped its notice, Americans cannot even console themselves with the knowledge that for all its intrusions into their lives, the spy agency is at least protecting them.

In reality, the only people getting any peace of mind out of the NSA's surveillance are government officials who can use it to cement their positions of power.



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