

DECEMBER 27

NSA spied on diplomats in push for Iraq invasion

Despite all the news accounts and punditry since the New York Times published its Dec. 16 bombshell about the National Security Agency's domestic spying, the media coverage has made virtually no mention of the fact that the Bush administration used the NSA to spy on U.N. diplomats in New York before the invasion of Iraq. That spying had nothing to do with protecting the United States from a terrorist attack. The entire purpose of the NSA surveillance was to help the White House gain leverage, by whatever means possible, for a resolution in the U.N. Security Council to green light an invasion. When that surveillance was exposed nearly three years ago, the mainstream U.S. media winked at Bush's illegal use of the NSA for his Iraq invasion agenda.

Back then, after news of the NSA's targeted spying at the United Nations broke in the British press, major U.S. media outlets gave it only perfunctory coverage – or, in the case of the New York Times, no coverage at all. Now, while the NSA is in the news spotlight with plenty of retrospective facts, the NSA's spying at the U.N. goes unmentioned: buried in an Orwellian memory hole.

A rare exception was a paragraph in a Dec. 20 piece by Patrick Radden Keefe in the online magazine Slate – which pointedly noted that “the eavesdropping took place in Manhattan and violated the General Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, the Headquarters Agreement for the United Nations, and the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, all of which the United States has signed.”

But after dodging the story of the NSA's spying at the U.N. when it mattered most – before the invasion of Iraq – the New York Times and other major news organizations are hardly apt to examine it now. That's all the more reason for other media outlets to step into the breach.

In early March 2003, journalists at the London-based Observer reported that the NSA was secretly participating in the U.S. government's high-pressure campaign for the U.N. Security Council to approve a pro-war resolution. A few days after the Observer revealed the text of an NSA memo about U.S. spying on Security Council delegations,

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I asked Daniel Ellsberg to assess the importance of the story. "This leak," he replied, "is more timely and potentially more important than the Pentagon Papers." The key word was "timely." Publication of the top-secret Pentagon Papers in 1971, made possible by Ellsberg's heroic decision to leak those documents, came after the Vietnam War had been underway for many years. But with an invasion of Iraq still in the future, the leak about NSA spying on U.N. diplomats in New York could erode the Bush administration's already slim chances of getting a war resolution through the Security Council. (Ultimately, no such resolution passed before the invasion.) And media scrutiny in the United States could have shed light on how Washington's war push was based on subterfuge and manipulation.

"As part of its battle to win votes in favor of war against Iraq," the Observer had reported on March 2, 2003, the U.S. government developed an "aggressive surveillance operation, which involves interception of the home and office telephones and the e-mails of U.N. delegates." The smoking gun was "a memorandum written by a top official at the National Security Agency – the U.S. body which intercepts communications around the world – and circulated to both senior agents in his organization and to a friendly foreign intelligence agency." The friendly agency was Britain's Government Communications Headquarters.

The Observer explained: "The leaked memorandum makes clear that the target of the heightened surveillance efforts are the delegations from Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Mexico, Guinea and Pakistan at the U.N. headquarters in New York – the so-called 'Middle Six' delegations whose votes are being fought over by the pro-war party, led by the U.S. and Britain, and the party arguing for more time for U.N. inspections, led by France, China and Russia."

The NSA memo, dated Jan. 31, 2003, outlined the wide scope of the surveillance activities, seeking any information useful to push a war resolution through the Security Council – "the whole gamut of information that could give U.S. policymakers an edge in obtaining results favorable to U.S. goals or to head off surprises."

Noting that the Bush administration "finds itself isolated" in its zeal for war on Iraq, the Times of London called the leak of the memo an "embarrassing disclosure." And, in early March 2003, the embarrassment was nearly worldwide. From Russia to France to Chile to Japan to Australia, the story was big mainstream news. But not in the United States. Several days after the "embarrassing disclosure," not a word about it had appeared in the New York Times, the USA's supposed paper of record. "Well, it's not that we haven't been interested," Times deputy foreign editor Alison Smale told me on the evening of March 5, nearly 96 hours after the Observer broke the story. But "we

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could get no confirmation or comment” on the memo from U.S. officials. Smale added: “We would normally expect to do our own intelligence reporting.” Whatever the rationale, the New York Times opted not to cover the story at all.

Except for a high-quality Baltimore Sun article that appeared on March 4, the coverage in major U.S. media outlets downplayed the significance of the Observer’s revelations. The Washington Post printed a 514-word article on a back page with the headline “Spying Report No Shock to U.N.” Meanwhile, the Los Angeles Times published a longer piece that didn’t only depict U.S. surveillance at the United Nations as old hat; the LA Times story also reported “some experts suspected that it [the NSA memo] could be a forgery” – and “several former top intelligence officials said they were skeptical of the memo’s authenticity.” But within days, any doubt about the NSA memo’s “authenticity” was gone. The British press reported that the U.K. government had arrested an unnamed female employee at a British intelligence agency in connection with the leak. By then, however, the spotty coverage of the top-secret NSA memo in the mainstream U.S. press had disappeared.

As it turned out, the Observer’s expose – headlined “Revealed: U.S. Dirty Tricks to Win Vote on Iraq War” – came 18 days before the invasion of Iraq began.

From the day that the Observer first reported on NSA spying at the United Nations until the moment 51 weeks later when British prosecutors dropped charges against whistleblower Katharine Gun, major U.S. news outlets provided very little coverage of the story. The media avoidance continued well past the day in mid-November 2003 when Gun’s name became public as the British press reported that she had been formally charged with violating the draconian Official Secrets Act.

Facing the possibility of a prison sentence, Katharine Gun said that disclosure of the NSA memo was “necessary to prevent an illegal war in which thousands of Iraqi civilians and British soldiers would be killed or maimed.” She said: “I have only ever followed my conscience.”

In contrast to the courage of the lone woman who leaked the NSA memo – and in contrast to the journalistic vigor of the Observer team that exposed it – the most powerful U.S. news outlets gave the revelation the media equivalent of a yawn. Top officials of the Bush administration, no doubt relieved at the lack of U.S. media concern about the NSA’s illicit spying, must have been very encouraged.

This article is adapted from Norman Solomon’s new book “War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death.” |For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com