

# NSA chief Alexander defends PRISM, deflects hecklers

At the Black Hat conference, Army Gen. Keith Alexander rationalized the nation's current, limited surveillance of phone and e-mail data to stop terrorists

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Byron Acohido, USA TODAY

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LAS VEGAS – Hecklers at the Black Hat security conference didn't stop the head of the National Security Agency from staunchly defending the nation's controversial PRISM surveillance program.

Army Gen. Keith Alexander brought anecdotes and a few statistics to support his assertion that surveillance of phone records and e-mail are used only in specific narrow instances, under strict review by federal judges.

Alexander told an overflow audience of several thousand tech-savvy attendees of the Black Hat cybersecurity conference -- held annually here at Caesars Palace -- that the PRISM program has helped the FBI stop 54 terrorists attacks in the U.S. and other nations.

And Alexander said whistleblower Edward Snowden's outing of PowerPoint slides describing aspects of the PRISM program caused serious damage to the nation's anti-terrorism efforts.

"Damage to our country is significant and irreversibile," Alexander declared. "What we're talking about is (deterring) future terrorists attacks."

Alexander deftly handled comments shouted from the audience. One attendee shouted, "What I'm saying is that we don't trust you." Someone else accused Alexander of lying to Congress, shouting, "How do we know you're not lying to us right now?"

Alexander denied lying to Congress and repeated often that his goal was to put facts on the table for discussion. He even asked security professionals in attendance for their help refining terrorist surveillance programs.

Nearing the conclusion of a question and answer session, one attendee shouted that General Alexander should read the Constitution.

Alexander's retort drew applause: "I have. You should, too."

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