

Obama bristles at suggestion he's shifted on snooping

By Kevin Liptak , CNN

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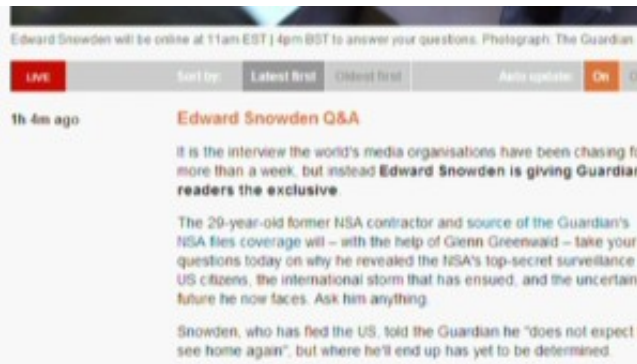
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(CNN) -- Critics who have compared President Barack Obama's stance on government surveillance to that of hawkish former Vice President Dick Cheney are missing his insistence on proper systematic balances, Obama said in an interview that aired Monday.

Defending at length the recently revealed government programs that gather information about phone calls and Internet usage, Obama said his focus has always been on allowing information to be gathered while ensuring necessary oversight.

"Some people say, 'Well, you know, Obama was this raving liberal before. Now he's, you know, Dick Cheney.'" Obama told PBS' Charlie Rose. "Dick Cheney sometimes says, 'Yeah, you know? He took it all lock, stock, and barrel.' My concern has always been not that we shouldn't do intelligence gathering to prevent terrorism, but rather are we setting up a system of checks and balances?"

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Obama's administration has faced a litany of questions since the disclosure of government programs that allow the National Security Agency to collect millions of records from U.S. telecommunications firms and Internet companies in the name of preventing terrorism. The source of the information, former CIA employee Edward Snowden, said he was moved to leak the top-secret documents because he felt the government was far overreaching its constitutional

bounds in collecting the data.

But Obama argued in the interview on Monday that the system in place includes steps to prevent Americans' rights against unlawful search and seizure from being violated.

"What I can say unequivocally is that if you are a U.S. person, the NSA cannot listen to your telephone calls, and the NSA cannot target your e-mails," Obama said.

Snowden claims online Obama expanded 'abusive' security

"On this telephone program, you've got a federal court with independent federal judges overseeing the entire program," the president continued. "And you've got Congress overseeing the program, not just the intelligence committee and not just the judiciary committee, but all of Congress had available to it before the last reauthorization exactly how this program works."

Some members of Congress, including Senate Intelligence Committee members Jay Rockefeller and Susan Collins, have questioned the notion they were given proper briefings on the NSA's program, however, and many lawmakers have said they first learned of the programs when they were revealed in news reports two weeks ago.

CNN poll: Obama numbers plunge into generation gap

Asked in the interview whether the NSA's process should be more open, Obama said, "It is transparent. That's why we set up the FISA court."

That body, however, operates in secret, and its locations are considered classified. It has approved the vast majority of the requests it has received for warrants, though those orders are also kept secret.

An administration official said Monday that Obama had asked his intelligence chief James Clapper to determine whether additional information about the data collection programs can be made public, part of what the official described as a "broader effort the president is undertaking to have a dialogue on protecting privacy in the digital age."

The swirling debate is grist for a "national conversation" about privacy and national security, Obama said.

"Not only about these two programs, but also the general problem of data, big data sets, because this is not going to be restricted to government entities," he said.

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