



# Obama's NSA Reforms Cut Mass Phone Surveillance, But Nothing Else

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Date: March 27, 2014

Earlier this week, news leaked that [President Obama would be taking some measures to reform](#) the National Security Agency's bulk collection program. Today, as expected, we learned that [the rollback will essentially only limit the NSA from collecting metadata from phone calls](#), without touching any of its other programs.

Unsurprisingly, that's not enough to assuage the concerns of some of the country's most prominent civil liberties groups, including the ACLU, Demand Progress, and the Center for Democracy and Technology. But, considering Obama's and the federal government's general response to Edward Snowden's leaks about [government data collection programs](#), it's a good start.

"It's worth taking a look at where we were a year ago. The NSA was secretly scooping up and storing all this data. Six months ago, the secret was out," Kevin Bankston, policy director of the Open Technology Institute at the New America Foundation said on a conference call discussing the new policy. "By January, the administration opened the door to ending the program but was talking about scary alternatives. So, I think today's announcement is a real turning point. We're pleased the President realized it's not necessary to keep records [of everyone] and this represents a huge step in the debate over the power the NSA should have."

Obama isn't getting rid of all of the NSA's data collection programs, however. Thursday's announcement applies only to what is known as the Section 215 bulk telephony metadata program, which is definitely a good first step, but, [as we've slowly learned](#), it's just one of many NSA and government surveillance programs. Metadata [can be used to identify a person's politics, identity, religion](#), and lots of other personal information, so it's definitely good news that the administration is scaling that back. But, the general consensus is that there's still a lot of work to be done.

"The ACLU is pleased the President came down on the right side of history and privacy and has seen there's no need to collect this data on Americans, but we're calling on him to go far beyond phone records," Michelle Richardson of the ACLU said. "There are other massive collection

programs, and those too need to be reigned in with the same sort of limited approach [the administration is taking with phone metadata.]”

Still, as Bankston said, it’s better than the tack that the government took early on in this process and it’s encouraging that the President has taken a step back from his overly defensive approach. Soon after Snowden initially revealed some of the NSA’s programs, [Obama noted that](#) NSA programs “struck the right balance” between keeping Americans safe and screening their personal communications, and said that the programs have “applied very narrowly to the leads that we have obtained on issues related to terrorism or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.” As it became clear that the government was collecting far more than it probably should be, his stance, publicly, has changed.

“I think it was a mix of both principle and pragmatism that has led to the change,” Bankston said.

It remains to be seen whether Obama or Congress will take any further action to cut back surveillance programs, but not too many people are holding their breath.

"They've been quite clear that they're talking only about telephone and they're talking only about Section 215," Julian Sanchez of the Cato Institute said. "To contextualize that, we've seen them play a set of musical chairs with this before. It's just one component of [a larger program] that has been broken up and farmed out to other authorities."