

The Washington Post

Here's who spent their Fourth of July protesting the NSA

By: Timothy B. Lee- July 5, 2013

Hundreds of protesters gathered in Washington's McPherson Square Thursday, the Fourth of July, for a rally against the National Security Agency's secretive domestic surveillance programs. The event was part of a nationwide "Restore the Fourth" campaign intended to demonstrate public outrage over domestic spying by the National Security Agency.

Demonstrations were also held in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and numerous other cities around the country.

Thomas Drake, a former National Security Agency executive turned whistleblower, spoke at the D.C. event. He was prosecuted by the Obama administration, but the judge threw out his case and berated the government for bringing it.

"We now have a government poisoning the tree of liberty," Drake told the assembled demonstrators. The government, he said, was "breaking the promise of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The government has taken our Constitution hostage, using secret law, secret rules, secret interpretations of legislation, all anathema to democracy."

At one point during the rally, a helicopter flew overhead at the same time an approaching siren could be heard. Spectators gazed upward, wondering if the government was spying on them at that very minute.

Julian Sanchez, a privacy scholar at the Cato Institute, compared today's domestic surveillance programs to the ones Congress investigated and dismantled in the 1970s. "The old machine was large but limited. It could spy on the government's 'enemies' but not on everyone," Sanchez said. In contrast, he said, the modern surveillance machine is "wired into the cell phones in our pockets and the Internet switches that route the websites we read and the e-mails we write."

Amie Stepanovich of the Electronic Privacy Information Center used the rally as an opportunity to announce that her organization was planning to file a Supreme Court challenge to a FISA court order allowing dragnet surveillance of Americans' calling records. The group contends that the government and the FISC have misinterpreted Section 215 of the Patriot Act, a position shared by the Patriot Act's Republican author. The Supreme Court has jurisdiction to review decisions by the FISA courts, but Stepanovich says if it accepts her case, it would be the first time the high court has conducted such a review.