Too many spies and secrets to track

An ancient Roman proverb asks, "Who watches the watchman?" We might update that to: "Who spies on the spies?" That is, who makes sure they're doing the right thing and not abusing their budgets, authority and powers?

The question arises after a three-part series in The Washington Post last week, "Top Secret America." Some of what it found:

"Some 1,271 government organizations and 1,931 private companies work on programs related to counterterrorism, homeland security and intelligence in about 10,000 locations across the United States.

"An estimated 854,000 people, nearly 1.5 times as many people as live in Washington, D.C., hold top-secret security clearances.

"In Washington and the surrounding area, 33 building complexes for top-secret intelligence work are under construction or have been built since September 2001. Together they occupy the equivalent of almost three Pentagons or 22 U.S. Capitol buildings — about 17 million square feet of space."

The result of this Kafkaesque nightmare is that the national-security bureaucracy "has become so large, so unwieldy and so secretive that no one knows how much money it costs, how many people it employs, how many programs exist within it or exactly how many agencies do the same work."

"Much of the problem comes from outsourcing," Julian Sanchez told us; he's a fellow at the Cato Institute whose research includes intelligence and technology. He said that privatization usually is good, including for hardware and other military projects, because those things "have external oversight," such as congressional investigations. But that's almost impossible with agencies in which budgets and activities are secret.

The secrecy also makes it difficult for waste-fighters in Congress to do their jobs. Commonly, he said, a member of Congress can issue a press release attacking specific waste in the Department of Housing and Urban Development, for example. But that's close to impossible when all information is secret.

Just throwing more money and bureaucracy at national security problems, he said, is "like trying to find a needle in a haystack by piling on more hay." The real problem, he added, is not a lack of information, but "a failure to connect the dots" among the data that already exists.

The last time Congress exercised adequate oversight over intelligence agencies was in the 1970s, when the Church Committee was formed after Watergate and other scandals caused a public outcry. Alas, that may be the only thing that again could to spur proper oversight.