



You are in: World: **Europe**
 Thursday, 6 July, 2000, 04:13 GMT 05:13 UK

- Front Page
- World
- 
- Africa
- Americas
- Asia-Pacific
- Europe
- Middle East
- South Asia
-
- From Our Own Correspondent
-
- Letter From America
- UK
- UK Politics
- Business
- Sci/Tech
- Health
- Education
- Entertainment
- Talking Point
- In Depth
- AudioVideo

Echelon: Big brother without a cause?



The Echelon system covers all international communications

By News Online's Martin Asser

Critics accuse the United States' intelligence community and its English-speaking partners of waging what is in effect a new Cold War.

At stake are international contracts worth billions of dollars, and at the disposal of the spymasters is an intelligence gathering system of immense power.

The Echelon spy system, whose existence has only recently been acknowledged by US officials, is capable of hoovering up millions of phone calls, faxes and emails a minute.

Its owners insist the system is dedicated to intercepting messages passed between terrorists and organised criminals.

“**No safeguards, no remedies - Its a totally lawless world**”

Duncan Campbell

But a report published by the European Parliament in February alleges that Echelon twice helped US companies gain a commercial advantage over European firms.

Duncan Campbell, the British intelligence expert and journalist who wrote the report, raises the prospect that hundreds of US Department of Commerce "success stories", when US companies beat off European and Japanese commercial opposition, could be attributed to the filtering powers of Echelon.

Listening in

Echelon evolved out of Cold War espionage arrangements set up by the US and UK in

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1948, and later bringing in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, in their capacity as Britain's Commonwealth partners.

The biggest of Echelon's global network of listening posts is at Menwith Hill, North Yorkshire, where about 30 "giant golf balls" called radomes litter the landscape. The system also boasts 120 American satellites in geostationary orbit.



The infamous Menwith Hill "golf balls"

Bases in the five countries are linked directly to the headquarters of the secretive US National Security Agency (NSA) headquarters at Fort Mead, Maryland.

The system's superpowerful voice recognition capability enables it to filter billions of international communications for whatever key words or word patterns are programmed in.

Mr Campbell believes that when the Cold War ended, this under-employed intelligence apparatus was put to use for economic gain.

"There's no safeguards, no remedies, " he said. "There's nowhere you can go to say that they've been snooping on your international communications. It is a totally lawless world."

Aggressive advocacy

The journalist, who has spent much of his life investigating Echelon, has offered two alleged instances of US snooping in the 1990s, which he says followed the newly-elected Clinton administration's policy of "aggressive advocacy" for US firms bidding for foreign contracts.

The first came from a Baltimore Sun report which said the European consortium Airbus lost a \$6bn contract with Saudi Arabia after NSA found Airbus officials were offering kickbacks to a Saudi official.



James Woolsey: No apology for industrial espionage

The paper said the agency "lifted all the faxes and phone-calls

between Airbus, the Saudi national airline and the Saudi Government" to gain this information.

Mr Campbell also alleges that the US firm Raytheon used information picked up from NSA snooping to secure a \$1.4bn contract to supply a radar system to Brazil instead of France's Thomson-CSF.

Frank admission

The US strenuously denies passing on commercial information to individual US firms, saying that there are clear laws to prevent it.

But former CIA director James Woolsey, in an article in March for the Wall Street Journal, acknowledged that the US did conduct economic espionage against its European allies, though he did not specify if Echelon was involved.

However, he poured scorn on the Campbell allegations that the US was using its technological edge to gain unfair advantage in international business.

"We have spied on you because you bribe," the ex-CIA boss wrote.

"(European) products are often more costly, less technically advanced or both, than (their) American competitors'. As a result (they) bribe a lot."

But that is not an argument that will have much influence among concerned European countries, which are currently investigating the threat or otherwise posed by the world's most powerful intelligence-gathering machine.

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