

WILL OBAMA ATTEMPT TO CO-OPT THE INTERNET COMPANIES?

Of late, Keith Alexander has added a new thing to his public schtick: inviting tech companies to come up with a way to dragnet more effectively. In the middle of discussions of why NSA must retain the phone dragnet, he'll stop, and say, if the tech companies can come up with a way to do it better (not just to do the same thing as effectively, mind you, but better), he wants to hear it.

At a minimum, that new schtick should alert you that in 2011 when they "ended" the Internet dragnet, they didn't end it, they just found a way to do it better, because that's how Alexander speaks of that decision in this context.

But you might also keep this shift in Alexander's schtick in mind as you read Matthew Aid's story about how the President whitewash became a graywash.

At the same time, the agency's once harmonious relationship with this country's largest high-tech companies, such as Microsoft, Google and Yahoo, is now a shattered smoking ruin, NSA officials fret. Only the "big three" American telecommunications companies—AT&T, Verizon and Sprint—appear to remain firmly supportive, and even they are beginning to put some distance between themselves and the NSA as shareholders ask pointed questions about their clandestine relationship with the agency.

In this political climate, it was perhaps inevitable that the Review Group would recommend making substantive changes in the way the NSA operates. "We had to go this route," a Review Group

staffer told me in an interview. "If we did not recommend placing some additional controls and checks and balances on the NSA's operations, the high-tech companies were going to kill us and Congress was going to burn the house down. Besides, our report is non-binding, so who knows what the White House is going to accept and what they are going to toss out."

Frankly, I think the relationship with some tech companies (Microsoft) has been more harmonious than with others (Yahoo and to some extent Google). And it was never the same as the telecoms enjoy, not least because the telecoms have been stealing the tech companies' data on and off at the government's behest for a decade now.

But I'm not at all surprised that citizen outrage had no effect on the Review Group and Administration, but Internet company outrage did.

Fast forward to today, where Obama's got a meeting with a curious group of CEOs.

- Tim Cook, CEO, Apple
- Dick Costolo, CEO, Twitter
- Chad Dickerson, CEO, Etsy
- Reed Hastings, co-founder and CEO, Netflix
- Drew Houston, founder and CEO, Dropbox
- Marissa Mayer, president and CEO, Yahoo!
- Burke Norton, chief legal officer, Salesforce
- Mark Pincus, founder, chief product officer and chairman, Zynga
- Shervin Pishevar, co-founder

- and co-CEO, Sherpa Global
- Brian Roberts, chairman and CEO, Comcast
 - Erika Rottenberg, vice president, general counsel and secretary, LinkedIn
 - Sheryl Sandberg, COO, Facebook
 - Eric Schmidt, executive chairman, Google
 - Brad Smith, executive vice president and general counsel, Microsoft
 - Randall Stephenson, chairman and CEO, AT&T

As WaPo's piece on this points out, the meeting mixes the leaders of the Internet companies calling for more transparency – Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft, to a lesser extent Apple, LinkedIn, and Facebook, as well as Dropbox – and AT&T, the company that has been stealing from the critics. In addition, Comcast, which almost certainly has joined AT&T in that more harmonious role, will attend.

The initial reports on the meeting dubbed it an effort for the President to discuss – and try to fix – Federal IT contracting in the wake of the ObamaCare website.

But the critics have issued a statement making it clear they intend to talk about surveillance.

So let's consider the dynamic to expect at this meeting. You've got a lot of Internet bigwigs, two Toobz bigwigs, and some smaller CEOs. That dynamic, right away, should prevent a truly candid conversation (because of the differing interests of all the parties).

And against that dynamic, the President will be discussing how to make it easier to contract with real software companies, rather than

bloated federal software contractors.

There will be the stilted conversation about NSA (and AT&T) stealing from Internet companies. And a far less stilted conversation about the federal government expanding its contracting with private sector Internet companies.

They'll have a stilted conversation about reining in government, and a less stilted conversation about putting more government dollars in Internet company pockets.

Update: Changed title to reflect these are Internet companies, not software, and fixed some syntax.

Update: Meanwhile, Obama has named a Microsoft Exec to be his new ObamaCare fixer, which should make it easier to send more business Microsoft's way.