

SOMEONE DOESN'T WANT THE TELECOMS TO GET IMMUNITY

Because they're leaking—and leaking big—to James Risen, Eric Lichtblau (and Scott Shane) again. Almost two years to the day since their first big scoop.

For months, the Bush administration has waged a high-profile campaign, including personal lobbying by President Bush and closed-door briefings by top officials, to persuade Congress to pass legislation protecting companies from lawsuits for aiding the National Security Agency's warrantless eavesdropping program.

But the battle is really about something much bigger. At stake is the federal government's extensive but uneasy partnership with industry to conduct a wide range of secret surveillance operations in fighting terrorism and crime. The N.S.A.'s reliance on telecommunications companies is broader and deeper than ever before, according to government and industry officials, yet that alliance is strained by legal worries and the fear of public exposure.

To detect narcotics trafficking, for example, the government has been collecting the phone records of thousands of Americans and others inside the United States who call people in Latin America, according to several government officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the program remains classified. But in 2004, one major phone carrier balked at turning over its customers' records. Worried about possible privacy violations or public relations problems, company executives declined to help the

operation, which has not been previously disclosed.

In a separate N.S.A. project, executives at a Denver phone carrier, Qwest, refused in early 2001 to give the agency access to their most localized communications switches, which primarily carry domestic calls, according to people aware of the request, which has not been previously reported. They say the arrangement could have permitted neighborhood-by-neighborhood surveillance of phone traffic without a court order, which alarmed them.

I need to go hang at FDL for the book salon thread (come meet Bob Drogin!). Afterwards, I'll come back and fill this thread out some.

One comment though: this story says the change came bc everyone went on fiber. David Kris has shown pretty persuasively that's not true--the wire/air split wasn't that different in 1978 when FISA was written. The difference, I suspect, is that now everything is digital.