

ADVENTURES IN CREDULOUS NSA JOURNALISM, EPISODE 2,524

The Hill sees fit to quote NSA's Compliance Officer John DeLong boasting that the NSA put in (one of) the reforms Obama announced the day he announced it – which (DeLong claimed) was proof that NSA's compliance system works.

Earlier this year, Obama directed the NSA to get court approval before it searched a database of Americans' phone records and limited those searches to people two "hops" away from a suspect.

DeLong said on Thursday that the changes were put into effect the same day that the president announced them.

"It helped to have a compliance program – a compliance workforce – that was already in place," he said. That way, the agency was not operating "from a cold start."

As I noted in January when commentators first started hailing what the Administration billed as a great change, it was instead presidential codification of a policy that had been in place since 2011.

I'm seeing a lot of enthusiasm about President Obama's **promise** to limit the NSA to 2 hops on its phone dragnet.

Effective immediately, we will only pursue phone calls that are two steps removed from a number associated with a terrorist organization instead of three.

But it's not that big of a limit.

As far back as 2011, the NSA had standardized on 2-hops, only permitting a 3rd with special approval. (See page 13.)

While the BR Order permits contact chaining for up to three hops, NSA has decided to limit contact chaining to only two hops away from the RAS-approved identifier without prior approval from your Division management to chain the third hop.

So in effect, Obama has replaced the NSA's internal directive limiting the hops to 2 with his own directive (which can be pixie dusted with no notice) limiting the hops to 2.

What NSA's ability to implement this change immediately shows is not the great performance of its compliance program, but rather the ability to do nothing while claiming a great victory over the status quo.

But don't look for that to appear in most reporting on the NSA.