

WHEREIN ALEXANDER THE GREAT CONQUERS THE WORLD

“Collect it all,” an anonymous source describes General Keith Alexander’s approach to data, in a bizarre WaPo profile this morning.

The article includes several anonymous condemnations of Alexander the Great’s approach.

- “But even his defenders say Alexander’s aggressiveness has sometimes taken him to the outer edge of his legal authority.”
- “Some in Congress complain that Alexander’s NSA is sometimes slow to inform the oversight committees of problems, particularly when the agency’s eavesdroppers inadvertently pick up communications that fall outside the NSA’s legal mandates.”
- “Even close allies have fretted about the concentration of so much responsibility – not to mention influence – in a single individual.”

It also provides details of why he is so dangerous.

- “Alexander has argued for covert action authority, which is traditionally the

domain of the CIA, individuals familiar with the matter say.”

- “He has been credited as a key supporter of the development of Stuxnet, the computer worm that infected Iran’s main uranium enrichment facility in 2009 and 2010 and is the most aggressive known use to date of offensive cyberweapony.”
- “‘He is the only man in the land that can promote a problem by virtue of his intelligence hat and then promote a solution by virtue of his military hat,’ said one former Pentagon official,”
- “Private companies should give the government access to their networks so it could screen out the harmful software. The NSA chief was offering to serve as an all-knowing virus-protection service, but at the cost, industry officials felt, of an unprecedented intrusion into the financial institutions’ databases.”

But the entire article – which focuses far more closely on Alexander the Great’s cybersecurity and cyberwar activities than terrorism – pretends to be about terrorism.

For NSA chief, terrorist threat drives passion to collect it all, observers say

In late 2005, as Iraqi roadside bombings were nearing an all-time peak, the National Security Agency's newly appointed chief began pitching a radical plan for halting the attacks that then were killing or wounding a dozen Americans a day.

At the time, more than 100 teams of U.S. analysts were scouring Iraq for snippets of electronic data that might lead to the bomb-makers and their hidden factories. But the NSA director, Gen. Keith B. Alexander, wanted more than mere snippets. He wanted everything: Every Iraqi text message, phone call and e-mail that could be vacuumed up by the agency's powerful computers.

"Rather than look for a single needle in the haystack, his approach was, 'Let's collect the whole haystack,' " said one former senior U.S. intelligence official who tracked the plan's implementation. "Collect it all, tag it, store it. . . . And whatever it is you want, you go searching for it."

The unprecedented data collection plan, dubbed Real Time Regional Gateway, would play a role in breaking up Iraqi insurgent networks and significantly reducing the monthly death toll from improvised explosive devices by late 2008. It also encapsulated Alexander's controversial approach to

safeguarding Americans from what he sees as a host of imminent threats, from terrorism to devastating cyberattacks.

This approach (which appears to be sheer regurgitation on the part of one of WaPo's writers, perhaps not surprising given Joby Warrick's contributions) replicates both David Petraeus' false claims about the surge winning the war in Iraq (rather than bribes to delay the violence that is exploding again) and the very legal ploy I've described is built into FISA programs.

That is, every time NSA proposes some vast new expansion of its collection, it does so by pointing to the Terror Terror Terror threat (whether or not that's the chief threat at hand). People within National Counterterrorism Center troll their files to build up the threat as urgently as possible, including using tortured evidence. And then they pull that together into a justification that probably looks just like the first paragraphs of this article as self-justification.

And remember, Alexander the Great was resuming comprehensive collection on Iraq after Jack Goldsmith had limited it to terrorists in 2004 (presumably after he and others discovered comprehensive collection includes eavesdropping on calls from servicemen calling home).

And by using the Terror Terror Terror threat, Alexander the Great can invoke the certainty of death to describe proposals that include camping on the most private bank websites to hunt for malware (to say nothing of offensively attacking other states).

"Everyone also understands," he said, "that if we give up a capability that is critical to the defense of this nation, people will die."

Once you get beyond the initial several paragraphs of propaganda, the story makes clear

that a number of people – and not just Jeff Merkle, who is one of the named critics – are beginning to realize this is too much.

But by the time you get there, Alexander the Great has conquered the world.

“Collect it all.”