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# Remember When Venezuela and Bolivia Kicked the U.S. DEA Out of Their Countries, Accusing It of Espionage? Looks Like They Were Right...

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By [CEPR](#)

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In their latest article on U.S. government spying for *The Intercept*, Ryan Devereaux, Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras review and publish leaked documents that show that the U.S. government may have used the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) to aid the National Security Agency (NSA) to spy on U.S. citizens and non-citizens in foreign countries. The NSA is shown to have assisted the DEA with efforts to capture narcotraffickers, but the leaked documents also refer to “a vibrant two-way information sharing relationship” between the two intelligence agencies, implying that the DEA shares its information with the NSA to aid with non-drug-related spying. This may explain how the NSA has gathered not just metadata but also the full-take audio from “virtually every cell phone conversation on the island nation of the Bahamas.”

The authors write,

The DEA has long been in a unique position to help the NSA gain backdoor access to foreign phone networks. “DEA has close relationships with foreign government counterparts and vetted foreign partners,” the manager of the NSA’s drug-war efforts reported in a 2004 memo. Indeed, with more than 80 international offices, the DEA is one of the most widely deployed U.S. agencies around the globe.

But what many foreign governments fail to realize is that U.S. drug agents don’t confine themselves to simply fighting narcotics traffickers. “DEA is actually one of the biggest spy operations there is,” says Finn Selander, a former DEA special agent who works with the drug-reform advocacy group Law Enforcement Against Prohibition. “Our mandate is not just drugs. We collect intelligence.”

What’s more, Selander adds, the NSA has aided the DEA for years on surveillance operations. “On our reports, there’s drug information and then there’s non-drug information,” he says. “So countries let us in because they don’t view us, really, as a spy organization.”

While the documents accompanying the article reveal detailed information that has never before been available to the public, this is not the first time that the DEA has faced allegations of spying.

In 2005, President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela stopped cooperating with the DEA after accusing it of espionage in his country. At the time, a State Department spokesperson responded by [saying](#), “the accusations that somehow the Drug Enforcement Agency is involved in espionage are baseless. There’s no substance or justification for them.” Using arguments that would change very little over the next nine years, a State Department official said at the time, “I think it’s pretty clear to us that the motivation for this is not the accusation itself or not what they state is the problem. The motivation is an effort to detract from the government’s increasingly deficient record of cooperation.”

Three years later, President Evo Morales expelled the DEA from Bolivia [saying](#), “there were DEA agents who worked to conduct political espionage.” He also [said](#), “we can control ourselves internally. We don’t need any spying from anybody.” The State Department spokesperson [said](#) in response, “the charges that have been made are just patently absurd. We reject them categorically”, and the news agency EFE reported that “Washington has repeatedly denied that the DEA has been involved in any activities in Bolivia apart from the war on drugs.”

Few of the press reports from 2005 or 2008 took these accusations seriously, and the State Department dismissed the allegations categorically, but in 2008, CEPR’s co-director Mark Weisbrot [wrote](#) that “To the Bolivians, the U.S. is using the “war on drugs” throughout Latin America mainly as an excuse to get boots on the ground, and establish ties with local military and police forces.” To this list, we can now add access to national phone and communication networks, and storage of the content of phone calls.

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