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(U) Back in Time: The ECHELON Story

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[ECHELON](#), a system targeting communications satellites, caught the ire of Europeans several years ago... (S//SI)

(C//SI) The ECHELON story... revisited. It's worth a reminder that NSA's foreign SIGINT relationships are not far removed from the public spotlight. ECHELON is the most vivid example of this fact, although events post-9/11 have overtaken the spotlight and the ECHELON story rarely makes the news these days. Could it be that the European nations that previously made the claims about ECHELON and industrial espionage have come to realize that, yes, there is an ECHELON system, but rather than conducting alleged industrial espionage, it is a vital contributor to the global war on terror?

(C) Undoubtedly the most prominent moment in the ECHELON saga was the Summer of 2000 when the European Parliament appointed a 36-member ad hoc committee to spend a year investigating ECHELON. As the media spotlight brightened, a series of events occurred which help tell the story. These included a visit to the US by members of the EU Commission, during which the members declared their intention to come to NSA to get ground truth. While the visit to NSA did not take place, the members were directed to our congressional oversight committees who reaffirmed with emphasis that NSA operates within all the rules and laws, and with full congressional oversight.

(C) Corporate NSA ([FAD](#), [SID](#), [OGC](#), [PAO](#), and [Policy](#)) ensured that our interests, and our SIGINT partners' interests, were protected throughout the ordeal; and ironically, the final report of the EU Commission reflected not only that NSA played by the rules, with congressional oversight, but that those characteristics were lacking when the Commission applied its investigatory criteria to other European nations. In the final analysis, the "pig rule" applied when dealing with this tacky matter: "Don't wrestle in the mud with the pigs. They like it, and you both get dirty."

(U) The extensive story of ECHELON will be part of the forthcoming history initiative.

(U//FOUO) This article is reprinted from the *Foreign Affairs Digest*, June edition.