WASHINGTON — While the Bush administration had defended its program of wiretapping without warrants as a vital tool that saved lives, a new government review released Friday said the program's effectiveness in fighting terrorism was unclear.

The report, mandated by Congress last year and produced by the inspectors general of five federal agencies, found that other intelligence tools used in assessing security threats posed by terrorists provided more timely and detailed information.

Most intelligence officials interviewed “had difficulty citing specific instances” when the National Security Agency’s wiretapping program contributed to successes against terrorists, the report said.

While the program obtained information that “had value in some counterterrorism investigations, it generally played a limited role in the F.B.I.’s overall counterterrorism efforts,” the report concluded. The Central Intelligence Agency and other intelligence branches also viewed the program, which allowed eavesdropping without warrants on the international communications of Americans, as a useful tool but could not link it directly to counterterrorism successes, presumably arrests or thwarted plots.

The report also hinted at political pressure in preparing the so-called threat assessments that helped form the legal basis for continuing the classified program, whose disclosure in 2005 provoked fierce debate about its legality. The initial authorization of the wiretapping program came after a senior C.I.A. official took a threat evaluation, prepared by analysts who knew nothing of the program, and inserted a paragraph provided by a senior White House official that spoke of the prospect of future attacks against the United States.

These threat assessments, which provided the justification for President George W. Bush’s reauthorization of the wiretapping program every 45 days, became known among intelligence officials as the “scary memos,” the report said. Intelligence analysts involved in the process eventually realized that “if a threat assessment identified a threat against the United States,” the wiretapping and related surveillance programs were “likely to be renewed,” the report added.

The report found that the secrecy surrounding the program may have limited its effectiveness. At the C.I.A., it said, so few working-level officers were allowed to know about the program that the agency often did not make full use of the leads the wiretapping generated, and intelligence leads that came from the wiretapping operation were often “vague or without context,” the report said.

The findings raise questions about assertions from Mr. Bush and his most senior advisers that the
warrantless wiretapping program was essential in stopping terrorist attacks. In January 2006, for example, Mr. Bush said the surveillance program “helped prevent attacks and save American lives.” Former Vice President Dick Cheney has made the same point, most recently in his public defense of the administration’s campaign against terrorism.

The report provided previously undisclosed details about the legal and operational schisms that dogged the program in its five years of existence. The 38-page document released Friday was an unclassified version. The bulk of the findings remain classified in separate reports from each of the five inspectors general, who represent the Justice Department, the N.S.A, the C.I.A., the Defense Department and the Office of National Intelligence.

The inquiry included interviews with about 200 government and private-sector personnel, but a number of key players — including David Addington, a top aide to Mr. Cheney; George J. Tenet, the former C.I.A. director; John Ashcroft, the former attorney general; and John Yoo, a Justice Department lawyer who endorsed the wiretapping program — declined to be interviewed.

Congressional Democrats who had been critics of the program said they found the report’s conclusions disturbing.

“While former Bush administration officials continue to argue that their policies made the country safer,” said Senator Ron Wyden, Democrat of Oregon, “I believe this report shows that their obsession with secrecy and their refusal to accept oversight was actually harmful to U.S. national security, not to mention the privacy rights of law-abiding Americans.”

A statement from Dennis Blair, the current director of national intelligence, said he was committed to “seeing that all surveillance activities protect U.S. national security and comply with the laws of the United States.”

Among other findings, the report concluded that Alberto R. Gonzales, as attorney general, provided “confusing, inaccurate” statements about N.S.A. surveillance activities to lawmakers in 2007, but did not “intend to mislead Congress.” Mr. Gonzales had said that a dispute between the White House and Justice Department lawyers in 2004 did not relate to the wiretapping program but rather to “other” intelligence activities.

The report states that at the same time Mr. Bush authorized the warrantless wiretapping operation, he also signed off on other surveillance programs that the government has never publicly acknowledged. While the report does not identify them, current and former officials say that those programs included data mining of e-mail messages of Americans. That was apparently what Mr. Gonzales was referring to in his Congressional testimony.

The investigation stopped short of assessing whether the wiretapping program violated the law requiring court-ordered warrants before wiretapping Americans’ communications. But the report faulted the administration for what it called a failure to conduct adequate legal review of the program at its inception.

The report said that Mr. Yoo, of the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel, gave the White House his first legal opinion endorsing the wiretapping in November 2001, weeks after it had begun, and that his boss, Jay Bybee, was not even aware of the program’s existence.
Moreover, Mr. Ashcroft gave his legal authorization to the program for the first two and a half years based on a “misimpression” of what activities the N.S.A. was actually conducting. In March 2004, a showdown occurred in Mr. Ashcroft’s hospital room when top Justice Department officials refused to sign off on the legality of the program and threatened to resign. The report said that the White House had the program continue by having Mr. Gonzales, then the White House counsel, sign the authorization.

What the report described as flawed legal opinions by Mr. Yoo and efforts to circumvent the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, the secret court that approves intelligence wiretaps, “jeopardized” the Justice Department’s relations with the court, the report said. The panel also recommended that the Justice Department examine criminal cases that grew out of the program to determine if prosecutors had complied with federal judicial requirements to disclose information to defendants.

In 2008, Congress restructured the federal surveillance law, the broadest such overhaul in three decades. The inspector generals’ report said the new law “gave the government even broader authority to intercept international communications” than did the original program. That same measure also gave legal immunity to the telecommunications companies that cooperated in the wiretapping program.