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Obama Supports Telecom Amnesty Bill

By [Ryan Singel](#) 06.20.08 4:28 PM



Presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama supports the spy bill compromise passed by the House Friday, despite having opposed retroactive amnesty to telecoms that helped with the President's secret, warrantless wiretapping.

The measure expands the [government's ability to install blanket wiretaps inside domestic communication infrastructure](#) and frees the nation's phone and internet companies from lawsuits accusing them of massive violations of their customers' privacy. The Senate is expected to take up and pass the Bush-approved bill next week.

The bill is widely perceived as a victory for the White House, and was agreed to by Democrats out of a fear of being labeled soft on terrorism in the upcoming elections.

Obama's campaign released the following statement late Friday:

Given the grave threats that we face, our national security agencies must have the capability to gather intelligence and track down terrorists before they strike, while respecting the rule of law and the privacy and civil liberties of the American people. There is also little doubt that the Bush Administration, with the cooperation of major telecommunications companies, has abused that authority and undermined the Constitution by intercepting the communications of innocent Americans without their knowledge or the required court orders.

That is why last year I opposed the so-called Protect America Act, which expanded the surveillance powers of the government without sufficient independent oversight to protect the privacy and civil liberties of innocent Americans. I have also opposed the granting of retroactive immunity to those who were allegedly complicit in acts of illegal spying in the past.

After months of negotiation, the House today passed a compromise that, while far from perfect, is a marked improvement over last year's Protect America Act.

Under this compromise legislation, an important tool in the fight against terrorism will continue, but the President's illegal program of warrantless surveillance will be over. It restores FISA and existing criminal wiretap statutes as the exclusive means to conduct surveillance – making it clear that the President cannot circumvent the law and disregard the civil liberties of the American people. It also firmly re-establishes basic judicial oversight over all domestic surveillance in the future. It does, however, grant retroactive immunity, and I will work in the Senate to remove this provision so that we can seek full accountability for past offenses. But this compromise guarantees a thorough review by the Inspectors General of our national security agencies to determine what took place in the past, and ensures that there will be accountability going forward. By demanding oversight and accountability, a grassroots movement of Americans has helped yield a bill that is far better than the Protect America Act.

It is not all that I would want. But given the legitimate threats we face, providing effective intelligence collection tools with appropriate safeguards is too important to delay. So I support the compromise, but do so with a firm pledge that as President, I will carefully monitor the program, review the report by the Inspectors General, and work with the Congress to take any additional steps I deem necessary to protect the lives – and the liberty – of the American people.

Politically, it would be hard for Obama to buck his party's leadership on this issue, and voting against the bill could anger the intelligence community. The former he needs now and after the election (if he wins). The latter he'll need to be able to rely on if he does win in the fall.

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