

“Its Legal”: US Congress Gives “Green Light” to Domestic Spying

After White House intervention, House defeats constraints on domestic spying

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Global Research, July 26, 2013

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Following intense pressure from the Obama administration and top intelligence officials, the US House of Representatives defeated an amendment that would have placed constraints on the National Security Agency's powers to spy on the American people.

The amendment to the Department of Defense Appropriations Act would have blocked funding for the NSA to collect phone “metadata” that is not related to a specific investigation. Among the programs exposed by whistle-blower Edward Snowden is one in which the government obtains and stores the records on nearly every phone call placed in the United States. This allows the state to construct a detailed social and political profile of every individual swept up in the program.

The House voted 217-205 Wednesday evening to reject the amendment, which was introduced by Michigan Republican Justin Amash. The vote was an opportunity for congressmen to posture as critics of the unpopular and illegal spying programs, with the votes pro and con carefully calibrated to ensure that the measure was defeated.

The Obama administration intervened extremely aggressively to block the amendment in its early stages. Even if it had passed in the House, it would still have had to be passed by the Senate and signed by President Obama to become law.

As the amendment was brought forward, the White House rushed to issue a statement on Tuesday evening. “We oppose the current effort in the House to hastily dismantle one of our intelligence community’s counterterrorism tools,” White House spokesman Jay Carney said. “This blunt approach is not the product of an informed, open or deliberative process.”

Carney’s statement followed an extraordinary closed door meeting convened by NSA head General Keith Alexander with members of the House of Representatives, urging them to vote against the restriction on NSA surveillance authority. House members were warned that the content of the meeting was “top secret.”

The powers targeted by the Amash amendment relate only to one in a whole series of programs aimed at gathering data on the population of the United States and the entire world. This was indicated by Democratic Senator Ron Wyden, a critic of the NSA, who said on Tuesday that the NSA is “an always expanding, omnipresent surveillance state.”

Wyden referred to multiple “secret surveillance programs.” He accused the Obama administration of “actively” misleading the public about surveillance on Americans, and said

that the government is “merging the ability to conduct surveillance that reveals every aspect of a person’s life with the ability to conjure up the legal authority to execute that surveillance.”

What Wyden describes is illegal and unconstitutional activity, for which administration officials and leaders of the military-intelligence apparatus should be impeached and tried in a court of law. The crimes go far beyond those of the Nixon administration.

These programs, however, have been implemented with the complicity of the entire state apparatus, including Congress and the courts.

Top lawmakers from both parties, including House Speaker John Boehner (Republican); Representative Mike Rogers, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee (Republican); House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (Republican); House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (Democrat); and House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (Democrat), staunchly opposed the amendment.

“Any amendments to defund the program on appropriations bills would be unwise,” Senators Dianne Feinstein (Democrat) and Saxby Chambliss (Republican), the chairwoman and vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said in a joint statement Tuesday, referring to the NSA’s blanket data gathering activities.

Dutch Ruppersberger, representative from Maryland and the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, celebrated the outcome of the vote, claiming that the amendment would have “eliminated a crucial counterterrorism tool.”

As usual, defenders of the surveillance program argued that it was necessary because the government was “at war with terrorism.”

These statements are made even as the US prepares to more directly arm the opposition in Syria, which is dominated by Islamist forces associated with Al Qaeda. They follow, moreover, revelations that the US is spying on governments all over the world, including those of nominal allies such as Germany and France.

The “war on terror” has for more than a decade served as a pretext for wars abroad and the abrogation of core democratic rights within the United States.

The real target of the surveillance is the American and international working class, a fact that is made clear by the nature of the programs. The Big Brother spying is part of the preparation of the American ruling class for mass social opposition.

The Defense Appropriations Act allocates massive resources for war while paving the way for further attacks on the social conditions of the working class. The bill includes \$512.5 billion for the Pentagon and an additional \$85.8 billion in “Overseas Contingency Operations” war funding.

The White House has argued that the bill’s shortfall of \$5.1 billion below current defense spending will force the administration to make new cuts to domestic spending, including health and education.

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