

House passes Patriot Act, but concerns persist_72505

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WASHINGTON (ABP)—The House of Representatives voted to reauthorize a law that a diverse array of civil-liberties groups decry but President Bush says is essential to fighting the war on terror.

House members voted 257-171 to renew and make permanent the 2001 Patriot Act with only minimal changes.

The Patriot Act—quickly passed after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks—gave government agencies broad new powers to pursue suspected terrorists and terrorist organizations. Civil libertarians on both the left and the right ends of the political spectrum have criticized many of its provisions as too broad and dangerous to the very freedoms the law's supporters aim to defend.

Its provisions are set to “sunset,” or expire, soon. But the House bill, if passed by the Senate, would make the law permanent.

The day before the House vote, a coalition calling itself Patriots to Restore Checks and Balances held a press conference to urge Congress to “fix the

Patriot Act to enable the government to fight terror while preserving important checks and balances on law enforcement, thus limiting undue government intrusion into the private lives of average Americans.”

The group included civil libertarians as well as some religious conservatives. Many of them expressed concern that the bill gives government officials too much leeway to define terrorism and terrorist groups, thus opening some religious or political groups to investigation and even prosecution.

The coalition listed concerns with a section of the law as one of several reasons why “conservatives should support a robust debate on the Patriot Act.” That section defines terrorism as “any act that is dangerous to human life.”

Materials from Patriots to Restore Checks and Balances said Section 802 defines an act of terrorism as an action that “involves a violation of any state or federal law, and appears to be intended to influence government policy or coerce a civilian population. This definition is far too broad and vague, and could easily sweep in pro-life demonstrators, among others.”

Groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union have also criticized Patriot Act provisions that give the Federal Bureau of Investigations broad powers to access an individual’s medical and financial records. The Patriot Act also allows the FBI to search homes without notifying their occupants for months.

ACLU leaders said the House should have spent more time debating its amendments instead of pushing the act through Congress as quickly as it did in 2001.

“One can only wonder why this bill was placed on an artificial fast-track,” said ACLU Senior Counsel Lisa Graves in a press release. “Controversial sections of the act do not expire for another five months, and like the initial

passage of the Patriot Act, its reauthorization process was rushed and not given the full measure of time for careful consideration of the ramifications of this bill.

“Instead of allowing a thorough debate on relevant amendments that would help place proper checks against government abuse, the leadership of the House instead pushed forward with a limited set of amendments and refused to allow votes on key amendments that would have restored key checks and balances and helped ensure greater oversight and protection of our civil liberties.”

In a letter addressed to the House, the ACLU said the House Judiciary Committee approved “a flawed bill that makes all but two of its expiring provisions permanent. It puts an excessively long 10-year sunset on those two provisions. It only includes minimal changes that the Justice Department has already conceded and does not address the major concerns raised about these intrusive powers.”

But President Bush, in a Baltimore speech the day the bill passed, defended its provisions.

“I want you to remember ... the next time you hear someone make an unfair criticism of this important, good law,” President Bush said. “The Patriot Act hasn’t diminished American liberties. It has helped to defend American liberties.

“Before the Patriot Act, it was easier to track the phone contacts of a drug dealer than the phone contacts of a terrorist. Before the Patriot Act, it was easier to get the credit-card receipts of a tax cheat than that of an al Qaeda bankroller. Before the Patriot Act, agents could use wire taps to investigate a person committing mail fraud but not specifically to investigate a foreign terrorist carrying deadly weapons. Before the Patriot Act, investigators could follow the calls of mobsters who switched cell phones but not

terrorists who switched cell phones. That didn't make any sense. The Patriot Act ended all these double standards."

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