



PATRIOT ACT CONTINUES TO SPARK DEBATE

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Almost two years after the introduction of the USA Patriot Act, President Bush is asking lawmakers to expand the powers provided under the anti-terrorism legislation.

The president's request is the latest spark in the controversy over the USA Patriot Act – the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act – which Congress signed into law one month after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

In a speech delivered the day before the two-year anniversary of Sept. 11, President Bush called on Congress to "untie the hands of our law enforcement officials so they can fight and win the war against terror."

The expanded powers would allow officials to bypass a judge or grand jury in order to obtain subpoenas in time-sensitive terrorism investigations. It would also deny bail to terrorism suspects and open up the federal death penalty for terror-related crimes that result in death.

Currently, the act allows officials to track an individual's communications on the Internet, install telephone and computer wiretaps, obtain search warrants for voice-mail and e-mail messages, access personal information, such as medical, financial and educational histories, and access library records without proof of a crime.

Growing Criticism

Supporters and critics of the law are constantly at odds over what liberties Americans should have to sacrifice in exchange for their safety.

The Patriot Act's most outspoken critic, the American Civil Liberties Union, or ACLU, an 80-year-old civil rights watchdog organization, called the act a "surveillance monster" and argued that there were "virtually no rules" governing the new powers.

The act slowly eliminates judicial oversight and upsets checks and balances, ACLU Executive Director Anthony Romero told Newsweek magazine.

"Of course we want to be safe, but the government of the United States under the leadership of George Bush and John Ashcroft has perpetrated a cruel hoax on the American people," New York Civil Liberties Union Executive Director Donna Lieberman said. "It has taken advantage of this unspeakable tragedy to launch a broadside against our fundamental rights."

Another complaint from civil liberties groups is that the law is increasingly being used against criminals, who are not terrorists.

A man in North Carolina accused of running a methamphetamine lab was charged with breaking a new state law that bars the manufacturing of chemical weapons. If he is convicted he could get 12 years to life, a crime that had previously only resulted in a six-month sentence, the Associated Press reported.

Defending the Patriot Act

In an effort to rally support for the Patriot Act, Attorney General John Ashcroft recently finished a 16-city tour, traveling across the United States to speak to law enforcement officials in defense of the act.

Ashcroft pointed to the triumphs the government has made under the act since Sept. 11, 2001. Among them, federal prosecutors have brought more than 250 criminal charges under the law, resulting in more than 130 convictions or guilty pleas.

"We have used tools provided in the Patriot Act to fulfill our first responsibility -- that of protecting the American people," Ashcroft said. "We've used these tools to provide the security that ensures liberty."

Former Assistant Attorney General Viet Dinh said the act's success is obvious because nothing has happened in the last two years, an achievement for law enforcement officials, the Department of Justice and Ashcroft.

Lawmakers, hoping to avoid the heated debates that surrounded the passage of the original Patriot Act, are expected to quietly attach additions to the Patriot Act to spending bills, which are usually easier to pass in Congress.

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