

Statement of Former National Security Officials

The President has spoken repeatedly and emotionally in recent days about the need for intelligence professionals to have clarity in the law. He has emphasized that it is not fair to ask these men and women to operate in an uncertain legal environment and that, in fact, legal uncertainty hampers operational effectiveness and thereby jeopardizes our national security. Yet legal uncertainty is exactly what will result if Congress heeds the President's call to enact legislation that replaces the obligation to use the procedures of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act with broad language about relying upon the President's constitutional authority.

Before FISA was enacted, courts addressed the issue of warrantless surveillance for domestic security purposes but did not clearly resolve the scope of the President's authority regarding foreign intelligence surveillance. FISA was enacted in order to clarify this murky legal area by setting forth a clear process for electronic surveillance of foreign powers and agents of foreign powers. The Executive Branch welcomed the clarity and this law has been viewed as an essential national security tool for 28 years.

This legislation would return a complex subject to the murky waters from which FISA emerged by making going to the FISA court or applying FISA in any way optional rather than mandatory. It leaves it to the President to decide when he has the authority to conduct warrantless surveillance of Americans or foreigners. Whether he has made the right determination will not be known unless and until it is challenged in court.

If advances in technology or other exigencies not contemplated in FISA present the President with a national security emergency, he should have a window in which to act while promptly seeking appropriate amendments to FISA -- and this could be provided for in the statute. But this extraordinary emergency authority should not be permitted effectively to repeal FISA.

FISA was a political compromise between the Legislative and Executive branches of government; unforeseen exigencies should require those branches of government to continue to coordinate, not condone unilateralism by either branch. Indeed, the world has become so much more complex, both technologically and socially, than it was in 1978, that making FISA optional rather than mandatory would significantly destabilize the balance struck then between law and policy.

As individuals with extensive experience in national security and intelligence, we strongly urge that the requirements of FISA remain just that -- requirements, not options. Congress should continue to work to get the facts and if, once they are provided, these facts demonstrate the need for changes in the law, amend it only as needed to meet genuine national security imperatives. Legal clarity is just as essential in this context as any other in which intelligence or law enforcement officers are asked to operate. FISA provides that clarity and should not be abandoned or amended in ways that render it irrelevant.

Ken Bass
Formerly Counsel for Intelligence Policy, Department of Justice

Eugene Bowman
Formerly Deputy General Counsel, Federal Bureau of Investigation

Mary DeRosa
Formerly Special Assistant to the President
Formerly Legal Advisor, National Security Council

Juliette Kayyem
Formerly Member, National Commission on Terrorism (The Bremer Commission)
Formerly Legal Advisor to the Attorney General, Department of Justice

Elizabeth Larson
Formerly Senior Staff, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence
Formerly Senior Executive, Central Intelligence Agency

Elizabeth Rindskopf Parker
Formerly General Counsel, National Security Agency
Formerly General Counsel, Central Intelligence Agency

F. Whitten Peters
Formerly Secretary of the Air Force
Formerly Principal Deputy General Counsel, Department of Defense

Stephen Saltzburg
Formerly Deputy Assistant Attorney General, Criminal Division, Department of Justice

William S. Sessions
Formerly Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation
Formerly Chief United States District Judge for the Western District of Texas

Michael A. Smith
Formerly Assistant General Counsel, National Security Agency

Brit Snider
Formerly General Counsel, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence
Formerly Inspector General, Central Intelligence Agency

Suzanne E. Spaulding
Formerly General Counsel, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence
Formerly Assistant General Counsel, Central Intelligence Agency

Michael A. Vatis
Formerly Director, National Infrastructure Protection Center, Federal Bureau of Investigation
Formerly Associate Deputy Attorney General, Department of Justice

William H. Webster
Formerly Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation
Formerly Director, Central Intelligence Agency