

Spies Like Us

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When I was a kid, I remember sneaking into my sister's room to look for her diary. Because it had a lock on it, I figured it was full of juicy secrets. All it contained, however, were references to "dreamboats" like Donny Osmond or the Hardy Boys' Parker Stevenson.

Rightfully, my sister was infuriated that I invaded her privacy, even though I couldn't figure out why. After all, her secrets were so boring.

I assume that most Americans' secrets are pretty dull, however, having anyone try to uncover them leaves us feeling violated. That's why the debate over the war on terror's warrantless eavesdropping is so heated: to protect us from terrorism, the government wants to sift through our communications, 99% of which are drivel, but we still view it as a violation of our constitutional rights.

Hopefully the debate will soon be over. Last week the House of Representatives passed a bill amending the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. The Senate is expected to pass it before the 4th of July break, and President Bush has already praised the measure.

FISA was passed in 1978 to balance our right to privacy with the government's responsibility to protect us from attack. Since 9/11, however, the government has tapped American phone and computer lines without first obtaining permission from the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, a special panel established under FISA. Last week's amendment was passed to maintain the Act's original intentions while addressing advances in telecommunications technology.

First, the bill aims to shield telecommunications companies from lawsuits arising from the government's monitoring of phone and computer lines. After September 11, over 40 lawsuits have been filed against telecoms by groups and individuals who claim the Bush administration illegally monitored their phone calls or e-mails.

Under the new bill, lawsuits against telecoms will be dismissed if the companies can provide documented presidential orders telling them wiretaps were needed to detect or prevent a terrorist attack.

If it becomes law, the amended FISA would expire in 2012, which according to my sister's diary, would have been the year she and Rick Springfield would be celebrating their 20th wedding anniversary.