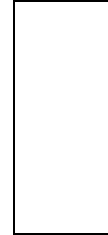


Opinion L.A.

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Opinion Edward Snowden: the unacknowledged author of an NSA reform bill



Edward Snowden speaks via videoconference during a hearing on surveillance in France on April 8. (Frederick Florin / AFP/Getty Images)

By **MICHAEL MCGOUGH**

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It's called the **USA Freedom Act**, but a more fitting name might be Edward's Law — as in Edward Snowden, the former National Security Agency contractor charged with violating the **Espionage Act**. I'm referring to a bill cleared by the House Intelligence Committee that would end the NSA's bulk collection of telephone metadata: information about the source, destination and duration of calls.

The bill, identical to a measure approved by the Judiciary Committee, addresses what was probably Snowden's most sensational revelation: that the government was indiscriminately collecting the phone

records of vast numbers of Americans under an expansive interpretation of the **Patriot Act**. The database could then be “queried” or searched for matches when investigators came into possession of a phone number thought to be related to foreign terrorism.

When the program was first revealed, President Obama essentially told the nation to relax. “Nobody is listening to your telephone calls,” he said last summer. “That’s not what this program’s about.” Moreover, the number of queries was apparently quite small, with no evidence that the program was being abused to target political dissenters.

Still, Americans understandably were creeped out by the fact that the government had a repository of information that could reveal much about phone customers’ daily lives. Eventually, Obama embraced the idea that the phone metadata should no longer be stored by the government. He also agreed that, except in emergencies, queries should take place only with a court order.

Those reforms would be codified by the USA Freedom Act. The bill isn’t perfect, and it was weakened somewhat to ensure passage. For example, it doesn’t reform “**backdoor**” collection of information about Americans from the surveillance of the communications of foreigners living abroad.

Still, if enacted by both houses of Congress, it would represent a significant repudiation of a program that arguably never would have been approved if it had been put to a vote. Whatever you think of Snowden — hero, traitor, defector, megalomaniac — he was the real author of this bill.