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NSA's Keith Alexander Calls Emergency Private Briefing To Lobby Against Justin Amash Amendment Curtailing Its Power

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WASHINGTON -- The National Security Agency called for a "top secret" meeting with members of the House on Tuesday to lobby against the first House amendment to challenge the agency's authority to cull broad swaths of communications data, according to an invitation circulated in Congress.

The amendment was authored by Rep. Justin Amash, a libertarian Republican from Michigan, and cosponsored by former chairman of the House Judiciary Committee and liberal Michigan Democratic Rep. John Conyers. The House [ruled the amendment in order](#) on Monday, and it is expected to get a vote sometime this week.

NSA head Gen. Keith Alexander scheduled a last-minute, members-only briefing in response to the amendment, according to an invitation distributed to members of Congress this morning and forwarded to HuffPost. "In advance of anticipated action on amendments to the DoD Appropriations bill, Ranking Member C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger of the House Intelligence Committee invites your Member to attend a question and answer session with General Keith B. Alexander of the National Security Agency," reads the invitation.

The invitation warned members that they could not share what they learned with their constituents or others. "The briefing will be held at the Top Secret/[SCI level](#) and will be strictly Members-Only," reads the invite.

The Amash amendment would put the House on record when it comes to NSA snooping. The measure, which would be attached to the Pentagon's spending bill, "ends authority for the blanket collection of records under the Patriot Act" and "bars the NSA and other agencies from using Section 215 of the Patriot Act to collect records, including telephone call records, that pertain to persons who are not subject to an investigation under Section 215."

The section of the Patriot Act that Amash is targeting was the subject of [the first piece in The Guardian about NSA leaker Edward Snowden's](#) revelations. A secret intelligence court has interpreted the law to allow the NSA to collect hundreds of millions of records on every American phone call under the theory that such records might be useful in future terrorism investigations. The intelligence community has claimed that the law is useful in thwarting potential terrorist incidents.

But Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee with access to classified details about the program, said there is [no evidence that the data collection](#) had been directly responsible for stopping any single plot. Civil libertarians, meanwhile, are aghast at the NSA's broad interpretation of the law, and [even the bill's author said he was surprised](#) at how it is being used.

Just seven months ago the House and Senate approved a military spending bill that reauthorized the NSA's extensive foreign surveillance operations, and in 2011 the [Patriot Act was reauthorized by broad margins](#) with bipartisan support in both the House and Senate. But Amash's amendment could capitalize on a new awareness of the scope of the intelligence community's activities.

The amendment could draw support from both Democrats and Republicans. Just how much is uncertain -- this is the House's first up-or-down vote on the NSA's domestic surveillance activities since Snowden made his revelations.

"This is the real deal: It's our first chance to roll back the NSA's spying regime, and we don't know when we'll have another one like it," said David Segal, executive director of [Demand Progress](#), a progressive policy group. "To invoke that expert on surveillance George W. Bush: After this vote we'll finally know who is with us in the cause to protect civil rights -- and who is against us."

Speaking at an event at the Center for American Progress on domestic data collection Tuesday, Wyden said that he hasn't read Amash's amendment but was encouraged by its progress.

"The fact that this has made it to the floor of the House of Representatives is unquestionably good," he said. "It is another step, as I've outlined, in the march to a real debate. We wouldn't have had that seven, eight weeks ago."

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This article has been updated to include additional information about the Amash amendment and comment from Sen. Wyden and Demand Progress.