

University of Virginia Center for Politics



Talking Turkey: The War on Terrorism and Civil Liberties

General Facts

- The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) is a challenge unprecedented in American history. It has led government officials and citizens to examine the balance between national security and civil liberties to accomplish the dual goals of preventing future attacks and maintaining our commitment to the U.S. Constitution.
- One important aspect of the GWOT is the Patriot Act, passed in 2001 shortly after the September 11 terrorist attacks. The Patriot Act made several important changes to existing privacy and communication laws, including increased wiretapping provisions, relaxed restrictions for surveillance, expansion of search warrants, and greater spending on electronic surveillance by the government.
- Supporters of the Patriot Act consider it a necessary provision for keeping America and its citizens safe. They feel that the increased measures of surveillance have enhanced information sharing within the intelligence community and the government, allowing them to act more quickly and effectively in stopping potential acts of terrorism. They also believe that these provisions help cut off the communication networks that make planning terrorist acts possible.
- Opponents of the Patriot Act believe that the provisions allow the government to violate their privacy and civil liberties. Americans not only cherish their civil liberties but believe in them as guiding principles for all human interaction. They do not surrender them lightly and any compromises in them will be tolerated only to the extent absolutely necessary and for a finite period of time. Some Americans feel that the Patriot Act takes away their right to privacy or that the positives of the Patriot Act do not outweigh the negatives of losing some civil liberties.
- Since President Obama's election, much of his foreign policy has been focused upon re-centering the war in Afghanistan to defeat Al-Qaeda. President Obama has laid out a comprehensive and flexible strategy for eradicating such terrorist groups from Afghanistan and

Pakistan. On top of deploying thousands of more troops, a revived civilian based effort has been enacted and frequent progress evaluations are submitted to determine the progress of the plan.

Links for Additional Information/Sources of Information

- In Depth
 - “Homeland Security and Civil Liberties” (source of most of the above information):
<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub697.pdf>
 - “Summary and Analysis of Key Section of the Patriot Act”:
<http://www.cdt.org/security/011031summary.shtml>
- President Obama’s foreign policy:
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/foreign-policy>
- Party Positions
 - Democratic Party:
http://www.democrats.org/a/national/american_leadership/national_security/
 - Republican Party: <http://www.gop.com/index.php/learn/issues/>

Talking Points with Your Child

- What is the balance between civil liberties and safety? Should one become more important than the other in certain situations, or should they always be given equal attention?
- Do you think that the government should be allowed to listen to your phone conversations? Why or why not?
- Do you think they should be allowed to all the time, none of the time, or only under certain circumstances?
- How do you think the Patriot Act helps the government catch terrorists?
- Do you see the Patriot Act as constitutional?
- Is the Global War on Terror justified? How do you think the United States can fight such a war?
- Should the United State be fighting a Global War on Terror?