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Congress wants to protect elected officials from our protests

Congress just made Barack Obama even more of an imperial president. They didn't give him a purple robe and a jeweled crown and scepter, but they might as well have, if a new law is enforced to the fullest. For the first time in American history, Congress protected a President from *lese majesté*, a monarchical French phrase, meaning "an offense violating the dignity of a ruler as the representative of a sovereign power," according to Merriam-Webster. In February, Congress passed H.R. 347, the Federal Restricted Buildings and Grounds Improvement Act of 2011, sponsored by Rep.

Thomas Rooney, (R-Fla.). Obama signed it March 8. Among other things, it stipulates that anyone who "knowingly enters or remains in any restricted building or grounds without lawful authority to do so" can be arrested and punished with up to 10 years in prison. It defines "restricted buildings or grounds" as "a building or grounds where the president or other person protected by the Secret Service is or will be temporarily visiting." The key, civil rights watchdogs have noticed, is that just one word was changed. "Willfully" was removed from before "knowingly." Thus, federal law previously stipulated that anyone who "willfully or knowingly enters or remains," etc. This is significant because the federal government previously had to prove that a person intended to violate the law. Now, simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time, "knowingly," is a violation. So suppose President Obama's motorcade is driving by your business, holding up traffic as it always does. You "knowingly" go to the window to see what all the horn honking is about. The Secret Service doesn't like that, and arrests you, even though you didn't "willfully" do anything wrong. Key tests will come when the law is implemented, Ilya Shapiro told us. He's senior fellow in constitutional studies at the **Cato Institute**. "I could see a court seeing these regulations not being tailored enough," he said. "For example, Congress can't ban protests that are within 100 miles of the Nation's Capital." According to the Wall Street Journal, the law is being called "the anti-Occupy bill," referring to the Occupy Wall Street movement and similar left-wing groups, such as Occupy Oakland. But the law could also restrict the right to protest of conservative groups, such as the tea parties. Sadly, this was a bipartisan bill. It passed unanimously in the U.S. Senate. In the U.S. House, only three members voted against it, all Republicans: Paul Broun of Georgia, Justin Amash of Michigan and Ron Paul of Texas, the GOP presidential candidate. Moreover, H.R. 347 applies not just to the president, but to any "other person protected by the Secret Service," which the law defines as, "any person whom the United States Secret Service is authorized to protect under section 3056 of this title or by presidential memorandum." So, if nutty Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad comes to New York City to give an address before the United Nations, and is authorized Secret Service protection, Americans could be arrested just for "knowingly" protesting outside. Of course, the president should be protected. So should other dignitaries. But current federal law already is strict in protecting them and punishing violators. When George Washington was elected president, some

supporters wanted to call him "Your Majesty," like a European monarch. But the humble father of our country insisted on the simple, "Mr. President." We urge the federal courts, when cases come before them, to reject H.R. 347 on constitutional grounds. Otherwise, the next Congress may insist that, when Americans appear in front of the President, they have to bow and curtsy.