

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Rand Paul Takes Aim at Patriot Act in Speech

GOP senator has made government surveillance a key issue in his presidential campaign

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May 20, 2015

Sen. [Rand Paul](#), trying to push for a wider debate on the Patriot Act and government collection of Americans' phone data, launched into an [hourslong Senate speech](#) Wednesday on an issue that is central to his 2016 presidential campaign.

Mr. Paul's maneuver isn't likely to end the National Security Agency's phone-surveillance program anytime soon. But it showed, once again, that the Kentucky Republican has a theatrical touch in highlighting an issue that he hopes to use to galvanize his libertarian-leaning base and attract donations from supporters of his 2016 bid.

Breaking into debate on a trade bill that has been before the Senate all week, Mr. Paul began speaking at 1:18 p.m. ET at about the time his Twitter account sent out the message: "I've just taken the Senate floor to begin a filibuster of the Patriot Act renewal. It's time to end the NSA spying!" He continued speaking into the evening, taking turns with some allies in both parties.

Strictly speaking, his talkathon wasn't yet a filibuster, the delaying tactic used to slow or obstruct a bill. Party leaders retained the power to cut him off on Thursday and return to consideration of the trade bill. But it would amount to a filibuster if he stuck with it long enough to delay action on the trade bill.

Supporters of the phone-surveillance program, which has allowed the NSA to collect metadata on all Americans, say it is valuable in tracking down terror suspects. Mr. Paul and other civil-liberties advocates believe the program violates Fourth Amendment protections against unreasonable search and seizure.

"We think the problem is the government shouldn't collect all of your phone records all the time without putting your name on a warrant, without telling the judge they have suspicion you committed a crime," Mr. Paul said on the Senate floor. That argument is aimed in part at courting the cellphone-focused younger generation of voters, one of the constituencies he is wooing in an effort to reach beyond Republicans' traditional base of older, white voters.

Mr. Paul saw an opportunity to spotlight his concern as Congress began considering legislation to extend the Patriot Act, the antiterror law passed in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, which is due to expire June 1. The NSA has said its phone-data-collection program was authorized by the act, although [a federal court recently undercut](#) that legal argument.

If the phone-data program isn't reauthorized, it must end June 1, a prospect that many believe is unlikely. Nonetheless, the Justice Department told Congress Wednesday that it and the NSA [would begin winding down the program](#) on Friday amid the debate about whether it would be reauthorized.

The House has passed a compromise bill, known as the USA Freedom Act, that would extend the Patriot Act but curb the phone-data program—a measure that Mr. Paul opposes because he said it didn't go far enough in protecting phone privacy.

The bill is slated for Senate consideration this week, along with an alternative that would extend the current program for two months to allow time to complete a longer extension. But the Senate is also struggling to finish work on trade and highway bills before the end of the week, when lawmakers are scheduled to begin a weeklong Memorial Day recess.

Mr. Paul has carved out a niche in the GOP presidential field by calling for an end to the NSA program and expressing willingness to allow the Patriot Act to expire if necessary. On the opposite side of the debate are Sens. [Marco Rubio](#) of Florida and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who want to extend the Patriot Act and its phone-data collection efforts.

In between is Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, who is supporting the compromise approved by the House. Mr. Cruz seemed to draw a contrast with Mr. Paul on Wednesday, telling reporters, “The Senate should not be playing chicken with the House. We should come together to pass the USA Freedom Act.”

The Paul talkathon recalled his [13-hour filibuster in 2013](#) over another question about the balance between national security and individual liberty, the administration's use of drones against American citizens. It earned him celebrity across the country, when he coined the “Stand with Rand” moniker that is a rallying cry for his 2016 presidential campaign.

Mr. Paul's return to the theme of privacy protection could give him an infusion of donations from his base supporters and help his campaign recover from some early stumbles. Since his April campaign launch, he got into a testy arguments in television interviews, and he has been criticized by the party's defense hawks for his cautious foreign policy.

The risk for Mr. Paul is that his willingness to hold up the antiterror law fuels the view among some Republicans that he is too soft on military might.

“It is a tough tightrope he has to walk on,” said Michael Tanner, senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. “This is his claim to fame, and to keep his base happy he has to take a very strong stand. On the other hand, he cannot look weak while he is doing this.”