Senate Panel Blocks Eavesdropping Probe

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The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence voted along party lines yesterday to reject a Democratic proposal to investigate the Bush administration's domestic surveillance program and instead approved establishing, with White House approval, a seven-member panel to oversee the effort.

Chairman Pat Roberts (R-Kan.) told reporters after the closed session that he had asked the committee "to reject confrontation in favor of accommodation" and that the new subcommittee, which he described as "an accommodation with the White House," would "conduct oversight of the terrorist surveillance program." The program, which became public in December, has allowed the National Security Agency to monitor phone calls and e-mails between U.S. residents and suspected terrorists abroad without first obtaining warrants from a secret court that handles such matters.

The panel's vice chairman, Sen. John D. Rockefeller IV (D-W.Va.), took a sharply different view of yesterday's outcome. "The committee is, to put it bluntly, basically under the control of the White House through its chairman," he told reporters. "At the direction of the White House, the Republican majority has voted down my motion to have a careful and fact-based review of the National Security Agency's surveillance eavesdropping activities inside the United States."

Rockefeller said he had spent 6 1/2 hours at the NSA last week getting answers to more than 450 questions he had submitted to the agency, adding that he had "fought hard for this information to be shared with the full committee." But suddenly, he...
said, "seven of them are okay and eight of them, sorry, you don't make it." Rockefeller is one of eight members of Congress who have been briefed on the program.

Also yesterday, legislation sponsored by Sen. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio), a member of the intelligence committee, drew support from two other key GOP panel members, Sens. Olympia J. Snowe (Maine) and Chuck Hagel (Neb.). It would permit warrantless surveillance of calls between the United States and another country involving "a designated terrorist organization" for 45 days, after which the government can stop the eavesdropping, seek a warrant, or explain to Congress why it wants to continue without a warrant.

The bill would also create a subcommittee that would carry out monitoring of all aspects of the program, "on a case-by-case" basis, DeWine told reporters. Roberts told reporters that DeWine had consulted with him and the White House and "in concept it is a very good proposal." At the White House, press secretary Scott McClellan described the DeWine proposal as interesting but reiterated the position that Bush already has the power to institute the program.

The NSA issue was brought up at a Senate Appropriations Committee hearing by Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.), chairman of the Judiciary Committee, who is drafting his own bill. Specter warned that he will try to reduce the administration's funding unless Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales agrees to answer more of his committee's questions.

"We're having quite a time in getting responses to questions as to what has happened with the electronic surveillance program," Specter said. "I want to put the administration on notice and this committee on notice that I may be looking for an amendment to limit funding as to the electronic surveillance program -- which is the power of the purse -- if we can't get an answer in any other way."

_Staff writer Charles Babington contributed to this report._