

The Other Senator From Connecticut

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A couple of weeks ago, Joe Lieberman, the "independent" senator from Connecticut, announced his support for Republican John McCain in the 2008 presidential race. This was no big surprise given Lieberman's hawkish views and failed relations with his own party.

But it does seem a little odd that Lieberman would endorse McCain over his Connecticut colleague in the Senate, Chris Dodd, who was also running for president until he dropped out after the Iowa caucus.

Sen. Dodd has a reputation, in some quarters anyway, of being "invisible." Based on recent events, that label is unwarranted. Dodd has made a very big splash regarding one of the signature issues of our time.

What did Dodd do? Remember the controversy when the government asked the telecoms for their records? They wanted to sift through the data for indications of terrorist activity.

Some of the telecoms complied with the request, apparently more concerned with assisting the administration than in protecting the civil liberties of customers. At least one telecom, however, asked to see the court order. Surprise, surprise. There was none.

Now, the Bush Administration wants to grant immunity to the telecoms that were compliant. Huh? That's right. The administration wants to reward them with immunity.

Of course, it may not be that simple. One of the benefits of granting them immunity is that it would preclude legal proceedings that might go places the administration would rather not see visited for one reason or another.

Are these corporations to be rewarded for assisting warrantless eavesdropping, an activity that many people consider illegal? Is the whole area to be closed off from legal proceedings? [The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) is reportedly suing one of the big telecoms over the matter.] Sen. Dodd doesn't think so and he's right.

The senator has stood up against giving immunity to the compliant telecoms and it's a stance of great import. His threatened filibuster of the "Spy Bill" that includes the immunity has caused the vote to be put off until Congress reconvenes after its winter break.

Dodd's efforts didn't get too much support from the Capitol Hill crowd. It seems that a number of his fellow democrats are more concerned with being labeled "soft on terror" than they are with protecting our fundamental freedoms.

The rule of law and the Constitution should not be sold short by anyone, and that includes our government and large corporations. It diminishes who we are when we allow it to happen. It also sends a mixed message to the world when we espouse high ideals and don't live up to them. It damages our credibility and dishonors us.

There's a special secret court and procedures that allow the administration to get court orders for these sorts of activities. They can even get them after the fact so as not to inhibit their operations. However, get them they must.

In America, no one should be operating without some sort of oversight. Checks and balances were built into our system of government for a reason.

Some will say the telecoms were just doing their patriotic duty by allowing the government access. Bear in mind, though, that the administration would have had no problem getting a warrant if they showed probable cause and were somewhat specific about what they were looking for.

It seems fairly obvious that the administration was engaging in the biggest "fishing expedition" of all time with our telecommunications as their "pond." We're talking Big Brother here. Are we really ready to accept an Orwellian police state?

Some will say it's necessary to fight terror and the innocent have nothing to worry about but it's just not that simple. It would be hard to put the matter in better perspective than Ben Franklin, who famously said, "Those who forsake essential liberty for security deserve neither liberty nor security." To us, those sound like the words of a patriot.

We should be proud that it's our representative that is fighting the good fight in Washington.

