

**Interview of Mr. Mike McConnell
Director of National Intelligence**

With John Roberts – CNN American Morning

**February 14, 2008
Transcript – As Aired**

MR. JOHN ROBERTS (CNN): President Bush and House Democrats are arguing over a bill that expands the government's eavesdropping powers. Democrats do not want to give phone companies retroactive immunity from prosecution. A temporary version of the law expires tomorrow, and the President says the country is not safe without it.

PRESIDENT BUSH: At this moment, somewhere in the world, terrorists are planning to do attacks on our country. Their goal is to bring destruction to our shores that will make September the 11th pale by comparison.

MR. ROBERTS: The Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell is calling on the President to veto any measure that would give lawmakers more time to consider the bill, and the Director of National Intelligence joins us now from our Washington bureau.

Mr. McConnell, first of all, why the urgent need for retroactive immunity for these telecommunications companies?

DIRECTOR MIKE McCONNELL: Good morning, John. The primary reason for retroactive immunity or liability protection for the carriers is to obtain their assistance. Quite frankly, we cannot do the job we have to do without the cooperation of the private sector. So the situation we're in now with private-sector companies being subjected to these huge suites, they're not inclined to give us assistance. So there's varying arguments about having the bill expire, extending it, or continuing in its current form. In either case, all three of those, we are losing and will continue to lose significant amounts of information because we can't do this mission without the cooperation and participation of the private sector.

MR. ROBERTS: So you say it's important to protect these telephone – these telecommunications companies from liabilities so that they continue to help in the program. But is it also important from your perspective to keep the prying eyes of attorneys who are launching these lawsuits away from uncovering information about the programs they go through the discovery process.

DIRECTOR McCONNELL: Well, certainly, John, that's a part of it. This is a classified program. We are engaged in tracking foreign terrorists in a variety of ways around the world. So more and more of this is discussed in the public, revealed in the public, and so on. Those that we are tracking are smart and they're adaptable. And so what's revealed to them through whatever process, they can change their techniques so it makes it more difficult for us.

Now, remember, these are terrorists who operate with the context of suicide that have sworn to commit mass casualties inside the United States greater than 9/11. So these are very dangerous men that we're attempting to tract.

MR. ROBERTS: I want to shift gears here just a little bit. On February the 5th, before the Senate Intelligence Committee, you issued some pretty stark warnings about al Qaeda saying that they're gaining strength in Pakistan, and that they are improving, quote, the last key aspect of its ability to attack the United States. And that's militants that can blend in to the Western population who wouldn't ordinarily stand out, if you will. If that's the case, Director McConnell, what is the United States doing about it?

DIRECTOR McCONNELL: Well, for one thing, we're attempting to get this FISA legislation, which has been passed in the Senate with two-thirds the Senate in favor after having looked at all of this program to get it passed into new law because that's our significant advantage. When I mentioned al Qaeda in my testimony, they have a place to operate, de facto safe haven in Pakistan. They have leadership; they have middle-level lieutenants. What they're attempting to do is to recruit those that can be trained and then infiltrated into this country. Those are the very people that we're attempting to track down.

MR. ROBERTS: But if they have this safe haven in Pakistan, is there anything that the United States can do other than to try to encourage President Musharraf there to go after them? Is it time for the U.S. to act if you think that they are – I don't want to say on the edge of an attack but certainly gaining strength and the ability to launch one.

DIRECTOR McCONNELL: Well, there are many aspects of what could be done about it. One is to work with the Pakistanis, and we are in fact doing that, very closely, very much engaged working with the Pakistanis to try to eliminate the problem there in the de facto safe-haven areas. However, those that have been trained, that have been repositioned in Europe or wherever, those are the ones that we have to identify and prevent from getting into this country. And we have been quite successful. There are many planned operations and individuals that have been arrested or cells broken up because of some of these tools and techniques.

So the dilemma I have, as the Director of National Intelligence, is I have a classified program that is being successful and it's being subjected to a somewhat political debate. The bill passed by the Senate provides warranted protection for U.S. persons anywhere on the globe. It also give us the authority to conduct surveillance against a foreign person in a foreign country without a probable cause requirement to get a warrant. So that's very important for us to have that capability.

MR. ROBERTS: All right, well, we'll see if you get that from the House as the negotiations continue. Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell joining us this morning. Mr. McConnell, thanks.

DIRECTOR McCONNELL: Thank you very much.

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