Now, With (Slightly) Fewer Risks

By CHARLENE LAVOIE and RACHEL LEWIS

When the USA Patriot Act went to the House and Senate for reauthorization, one complaint our legislators tried to remedy was the act's vague terminology.

For example, the House set actual, numerical limits for how soon after a "facility or place" is wiretapped that the user must notify a judge. The act has always been specific about the meaning of being a "patriot."

USA Patriot Act has narrowed the broad definition of "one who loves, supports, and defends one's country" to "Uniting and Supporting America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required for the Interception and Obstruction of Terrorism."

There are now two kinds of patriots: the self-termed American patriots, who use or support spy surveillance on their citizens in order to "obstruct terrorism" and the regular kind.

The House reauthorized the act, suggesting new 10-year "sunsets" for some of the act's most controversial features, like the government's right to record private conversations via wiretaps and access business records. The Senate added an amendment shortening the sunsets to four years, and restricting time notifications on "sneak and peek" searches imposed by the act, as well as laying down some stricter—or at least more specific—guidelines on how the act is to be used and overseen. Most of the policies remain much the same. The FBI can still record our private communications, rifle through our business and library records, and even search our houses. Sometimes they just have to tell us about it a little sooner after the fact than they did before.

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The problem is that the act is political comfort food. It may provide a rush of security and well-being to a fearful nation, but the overall effect on our civil liberties is unhealthy.

And, just as no amount of new packaging, lowered carbohydrates, or added vitamins can make comfort food truly good for us, the slightly revamped USA Patriot Act is not going to benefit our citizen body. It will sicken us, community by community.

The act is not only a high-powered, federal policy. It's also a local affair. All too often, the sweeping federal laws of the Patriot Act collide with state and town policies, resulting in civil wrongs. The act was recently used to stop homeless people from seeking shelter in a train station, under a provision addressing "attacks and other violence against mass transportation systems." The Justice Department criticized this incident, saying it represented a "misunderstanding" of the Patriot Act.

But deciding the meaning of the Patriot Act is not a job anyone is equipped for. Currently, four members of the five-person board overseeing Patriot Act activities have close Republican ties. There was a failed attempt to establish a civilian board.

Federal policy continues to conflict with the interests of communities. Last year, citizens of Cornwall petitioned for a meeting to pass resolutions condemning the Patriot Act, only to find that towns had no authority in the law to proclaim