

Frequently Used FISA And Related Terms

“Abouts” Collection: _____	3
Advanced Filter Function: _____	3
Amici Curiae: _____	3
Arctic Frost Investigation: _____	3
Backdoor Searches: _____	3
Biggs Amendment: _____	3
Carpenter v United States: _____	3
The Church Committee: _____	3
Crossfire Hurricane: _____	3
Data Broker Loophole: _____	3
Downstream Collection: _____	3
Electronic Communication Service Provider (ECSP) Amendment: _____	3
Executive Order 12333: _____	4
FISA Amendments Act of 2008: _____	4
FISA Title I: _____	4
FISC (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court): _____	4
The Fourth Amendment Is Not For Sale Act: _____	4
GSRA (The Government Surveillance Reform Act): _____	4
HPSCI: _____	4
The “IC”: _____	4
Incidental Collections: _____	4
The Lee-Leahy Amendment: _____	4
Metadata: _____	4
The Paul Amendment: _____	4
PCLOB (The Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board): _____	4
Pen Register: _____	5
PRISM: _____	5
Query: _____	5

Reverse Targeting:	5
RISAA (The Reforming Intelligence and Securing America Act):	5
Section 215 of the PATRIOT Act:	5
Section 702 of FISA:	5
Stellar Wind:	5
Three Hop Rule:	5
Trap and Trace Device:	5
Upstream Collection:	5
USA FREEDOM Act of 2015:	6
Woods Procedures:	6
The Wyden-Daines Amendment:	6

The following definitions are short summaries. For future information see AFP's one-pagers or contact Molly Powell at mpowell@afpbq.org.

“Abouts” Collection: The practice of collecting communications in which the target is merely mentioned, even if the target themselves has no knowledge of those communications. An [amendment](#) to RISAA prohibiting this practice was agreed to by a voice vote.

Advanced Filter Function: A system of searching the data collected under 702 that masks the true number of searches by not classifying a number of them as “queries.” Because of this system, the number of reported queries does not reflect the actual number of 702 database searches.

Amici Curiae: Individuals who are not party to the legal case at hand, but who assist the court by providing outside expertise. Civil liberties advocates have pushed for an expanded role for the amici curiae in FISA court proceedings, which typically only hear from the national security and intelligence viewpoint.

Arctic Frost Investigation: The investigation regarding the effort to overturn the results of the 2020 election. Several months into the investigation, Merrick Garland appointed Jack Smith as Special Counsel. The investigation obtained the phone records (though not the content of those calls) during the week of January 6, 2021 of Sens. Johnson, Graham, Hagerty, Hawley, Sullivan, Tuberville, Lummis, and Blackburn, as well as those of Rep. Mike Kelly.

Backdoor Searches: Searches of Americans’ data that was collected incidentally under Section 702. 702 authorizes the communications of non-U.S. persons to be targeted for surveillance and collection; these communications are gathered into a database, including when they are with an American. A backdoor search is when that database is searched for a particular American, without a warrant.

Biggs Amendment: An [amendment](#) to RISAA which would have prohibited most warrantless searches of Americans’ communications contained in FISA 702. The amendment failed 212-212.

Carpenter v United States: A Supreme Court case that held that a search of cell phone location data requires a warrant. It reversed a lower court decision that held that it was not a “search” as protected under the Fourth Amendment.

The Church Committee: A 1975 Senate select [committee](#) led by Sen. Frank Church. Its purpose was to investigate abuses by the CIA, NSA, FBI, and IRS. The Committee was formed after investigative journalist Seymour Hersh published a [report](#) detailing the CIA’s domestic surveillance programs targeting anti-Vietnam war groups and other dissident groups. The Committee uncovered a number of major scandals, including mass surveillance of U.S. citizens; targeted surveillance of civil rights leaders, including Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.; experiments on unwitting Americans; and CIA plots to assassinate foreign leaders. It led to a number of reforms of intelligence agencies, though the 2013 Snowden leaks revealed that most of the reforms had failed.

Crossfire Hurricane: The FBI investigation into collusion between Russia and the 2016 Trump campaign.

Data Broker Loophole: Practice of circumventing Fourth Amendment warrant requirements by purchasing American’s personal data from data brokers. Personal information is collected by internet service providers, phone carriers, social media platforms, and app developers; it is then sold to data brokers. This data includes, but is not limited to, browser history, phone records, credit card and banking activity, private messages, and geolocation history.

Downstream Collection: Collection of stored electronic data, usually from servers of internet service providers. (See upstream collection for data in transit.)

Electronic Communication Service Provider (ECSP) Amendment: Amendment to 2024 FISA 702 reauthorization (RISAA). Under 702, ECSPs may be compelled to hand over data that passed through their infrastructure. The amendment expanded the definition of an ECSP to major communications platforms or services (such as Google, Verizon, Meta) to “any other service provider who has access to equipment that is being or may be used to transmit or store wire or electronic communications.” This expanded definition now includes small businesses, nonprofits, and some landlords with communications infrastructure such as publicly available Wi-Fi routers. This legislation was nicknamed the “Make Everyone a Spy Bill.”

Executive Order 12333: An executive order dealing with electronic surveillance that is conducted overseas, among other issues. It does not authorize targeting of individual Americans, but it does allow for bulk collection, which results in the acquisition of huge quantities of Americans’ communications. It allows for programs such as one collecting all phone calls coming in and out of certain countries. Because it deals with overseas activity, it is not subject to judicial oversight.

FISA Amendments Act of 2008: Law that, among other provisions, added Section 702 to the Foreign Intelligence and Surveillance Act.

FISA Title I: Distinct from Section 702, FISA Title I governs the targeting of foreign powers or agents of foreign powers for electronic surveillance. Agents of foreign powers may be U.S. persons. If the target is a U.S. person, a FISA Title I application must be approved before the surveillance is conducted (see the Woods Procedures). The FISC approves or disapproves applications, which must be renewed every 90 days. Note: Carter Page was surveilled under FISA Title I.

FISC (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court): FISA court to provide judicial oversight of classified intelligence community activities. Reviews FISA activities, including electronic surveillance, physical searches, and pen/trap surveillance.

The Fourth Amendment Is Not For Sale Act: [Legislation](#) to close the data broker loophole. The bill would have prevented most purchases of U.S. persons’ data from data brokers and service providers. It passed the House in 2024, but was not taken up by the Senate.

GSRA (The Government Surveillance Reform Act): A bill to reform FISA Section 702. Its provisions include warrant requirements, data broker loophole fixes, FISC reforms, and correcting the ECSP amended definition. It has been introduced in multiple Congresses, most recently in March 2026.

HPSCI: The House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence.

The “IC”: The intelligence community. Usually refers to executive branch intelligence agencies.

Incidental Collections: Collection of communications from individuals who are not the target of a search, but who may be in contact with the target. These communications are collected “incidentally” while gathering target’s communications.

The Lee-Leahy Amendment: An [amendment](#) to the [USA FREEDOM Reauthorization Act of 2020](#) which would have expanded the cases in which *amici* participate. It passed the Senate 79-19. (Also known as the Leahy-Lee Amendment.)

Metadata: Defined as data about other data. For instance, metadata of phone calls would include who the call was made to, when it was made, and how long it lasted, but not what was said on that call.

The Paul Amendment: An [amendment](#) to the [USA FREEDOM Reauthorization Act of 2020](#) which would have prohibited information collected via Executive Order 12333 or under FISA provisions from being used against American citizens during investigations or court proceedings. Standard criminal warrants would instead be required to obtain this information.

PCLOB (The Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board): An independent [agency](#) with an oversight and advisory role in intelligence activities, balancing national security and civil liberties. It has a bipartisan, five-member board appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. Under every president since its establishment, the board has lacked a quorum for a period while waiting for the president to appoint more members.

Pen Register: A device that records outgoing phone numbers that a specific phone dials. (See trap and trace device for incoming collection.)

PRISM: Program to collect bulk data from internet service providers. It [was revealed](#) in the 2013 leaks. It was approved by the FISA court.

Query: A search for specific data within a larger database of collected information.

Reverse Targeting: Practice of naming a non-U.S. person as the target of surveillance, when the real purpose is to surveil an American with whom the “target” is communicating. Section 702 allows for collection of communications of individuals who are not American citizens and who are reasonably believed to be currently outside of the U.S. U.S. persons are not allowed to be the target, but their communications with non-U.S. persons targets may be collected by intelligence agencies.

RISAA (The Reforming Intelligence and Securing America Act): [H.R. 7888](#) extended FISA Section 702 for two years. If not reauthorized, it will expire at midnight, April 19, 2026. RISAA included some limited reforms, but in other ways failed to address central concerns and extended Section 702’s surveillance reach. Notably, it expanded the definition of electronic communications service providers (ECSPs). RISAA was signed into law on April 20, 2024, by Joe Biden.

Section 215 of the PATRIOT Act: Allows NSA data collection of “any tangible thing” if the FISA Court found it “relevant” to a foreign intelligence investigation. Passed in October 2001, the NSA was used for bulk data collection of Americans’ private information (revealed in the 2013 Snowden leaks).

Section 702 of FISA: Authorizes the United States government to conduct surveillance on non-U.S. persons reasonably believed to be outside of the U.S. This includes collection complete records of a target’s communications, both to and from the target. While Americans are not allowed to be the direct targets of this surveillance, many provisions of the law nonetheless allow for widespread “incidental” collection and search of Americans’ personal information.

Stellar Wind: Code name for a secret NSA mass data collection program. The extent of the program was made public with the 2013 Snowden revelations. It was approved by the FISA court.

Three Hop Rule: Practice of gathering the communications of a target plus everyone within three degrees of communications separation from that target. All communications made by individuals with whom the target interacts is the first hop. All communications made by individuals with whom the first hop people interact are the second hop. The NSA [acknowledged](#) this practice in a 2013 House Committee Hearing.

Trap and Trace Device: A device that records the sources of incoming calls to a specific phone. (See pen register for outgoing collection.)

Upstream Collection: Collection of data that takes place as that data is in transit over the internet backbone. Upstream collection was used heavily in NSA bulk data collection programs for Americans' communications. Messages between two people in the same country are frequently sent through sites or providers overseas; because of this, Americans' communications were mass gathered under upstream collection that was authorized for foreign communications.

USA FREEDOM Act of 2015: Major bill to reauthorize and amend elements of FISA 702 and the PATRIOT Act Section 215. It included a number of major reforms, but some proposed reforms were dropped from the final bill. Many of the reforms fell far short of their promised effect.

Woods Procedures: Requirements for FISA applications to conduct surveillance or searches. Each FISA application must contain 1) supporting documentation for every factual assertion contained in a FISA application, and 2) supporting documentation and the results of required database searches and other verifications. The Woods Procedures were implemented in 2001 after errors were found in FBI counterterrorism FISA applications submitted to FISC.

The Wyden-Daines Amendment: An [amendment](#) to the [USA FREEDOM Reauthorization Act of 2020](#) to remove internet website browsing information and search history from scope of authority to access certain business records for foreign intelligence and international terrorism investigations.