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A Conflict Without End

Osama bin Laden had been dead only a few days when House Republicans began their efforts to expand, rather than contract, the war on terror. Not content with the president's wide-ranging powers to pursue the archcriminals of Sept. 11, 2001, Republicans want to authorize the military to pursue virtually anyone suspected of terrorism, anywhere on earth, from now to the end of time.

This wildly expansive authorization would, in essence, make the war on terror a permanent and limitless aspect of life on earth, along with its huge potential for abuse.

The [Authorization for Use of Military Force](#), approved by Congress a week after Sept. 11, 2001, gives the president the power to go after anyone who committed or aided in the 9/11 attacks, or who harbored such people, to prevent acts of terrorism. It was this document that authorized the war in Afghanistan and the raid on Bin Laden's compound.

A new bill, approved last week by the House Armed Services Committee and heading for the floor this month, would go much further. It would allow military attacks against not just Al Qaeda and the Taliban but also any "associated forces that are engaged in hostilities against the United States." That deliberately vague phrase could include anyone who doesn't like America, even if they are not connected in any way with the 2001 attacks. It could even apply to domestic threats.

It allows the president to detain "belligerents" until the "termination of hostilities," presumably at a camp like the one in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Since it does not give a plausible scenario of how those hostilities could be considered over, it raises the possibility of endless detention for anyone who gets on the wrong side of a future administration.

The bill, part of the National Defense Authorization Act, was introduced by the committee chairman, Howard McKeon of California, who said it simply aligns old legal authorities with current threats. We've heard that before, about wiretapping and torture, and it was always untrue.

These powers are not needed, for current threats, or any other threat. President Obama has not asked for them (though, unfortunately, the administration has used a similar definition of the enemy in legal papers). Under the existing powers, or perhaps ignoring them, President George W. Bush abused his authority for many years with excessive detentions and illegal wiretapping. Those kinds of abuses could range even more widely with this open-ended authorization.

As more than 30 House Democrats protested to Mr. McKeon, a declaration of “global war against nameless individuals, organizations, and nations” could “grant the president near unfettered authority to initiate military action around the world without further Congressional approval.” If a future administration wanted to attack Iran unilaterally, it could do so without having to consult with Congress.

This measure is unnecessary. The Bush administration demonstrated how dangerous it could be. The Democrats were right to demand the House conduct hearings on the measure, which was approved with little scrutiny. If it passes, the Senate should amend it out of existence, and President Obama should make clear he will veto it.