

Congress clashes over online domain name oversight

April 10 2014, by Alan Fram

Republican opposition to Obama administration plans to spin off U.S. oversight of the Internet's domain name system is evolving into an election-year political fight, with lawmakers using it as the latest front in their attacks on President Barack Obama's trustworthiness.

"We've seen enough out of this administration and its imperial presidency politics that I'm not going to just give them a blank pen and then walk away," Republican Rep. Greg Walden said Thursday as a House subcommittee he chairs voted to impose a one-year delay in implementing any changes so congressional investigators could study the issue.

The party-line 16-10 vote came as [administration officials](#) defended their proposal at other congressional hearings. And Democratic lawmakers said Republican warnings that the Internet could be turned over to hostile governments were the stuff of fantasy.

"It's not a conspiracy or a digital black helicopter," Democratic Rep. Anna Eshoo said in a sarcastic reference to 1990s-era claims by some militias and other right-wing groups about mysterious government surveillance aircraft. "It's a plan, and I think it's time to move forward with it."

The back and forth comes during a campaign season in which Republicans have vilified Obama as exceeding his powers by taking steps such as delaying various deadlines set by his health care overhaul

law, which they solidly oppose.

The latest dispute is over an administration announcement last month that it wants to give up its oversight of the non-profit U.S. corporation that manages the Internet's system of addresses, such as www.ap.org.

That entity—the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers—has allocated domain names and the numerical addresses to which they are attached since 1998. Ever since, ICANN's work has been overseen by the Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

"We are not giving up our leadership role," Lawrence Strickling, who heads the NTIA, told members of the House Judiciary Committee. "We are stepping out of clerical functions we currently perform."

Shedding oversight of how ICANN distributes addresses is a long-planned, logical next step, administration officials say. They say the move would still leave the U.S. with a voice on advisory committees and other entities that make decisions about larger questions about Internet policies.

The Obama administration and ICANN say decisions about who would take the current U.S. oversight role will be made by companies, engineers, nonprofit groups, governments and other Internet users—the same way many decisions about Internet policy are currently made.

"Everyone is at the table with equal voice," ICANN's president and CEO, Fadi Chehade, told the Judiciary panel. "The model works, and it works very well."

Critics say there is no way to know what new entity would take the administration's role, or what other changes might occur should the U.S.

lose leverage with the domain assigning corporation The U.S. government has had a series of contracts with ICANN since 1998, with the current one expiring in September 2015—with two two-year renewals possible.

"Many Americans are past the point of being satisfied with vague assurances when hard answers, evidence and sober judgment are needed," House Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte, a Republican, said Thursday as one of his panel's subcommittees questioned Strickling.

Another fear of critics is that by reducing its role, the U.S. could open the door to unfriendly governments increasing their control of the Internet. In recent months, some countries including Russia, China and Iran have proposed giving a United Nations agency more influence over the Internet, which many view as a backdoor way of increasing online censorship by repressive regimes.

Democrats argued that by trying to block the administration's plans to end its monitoring of online addresses, Republicans actually were helping that effort by making it appear that the U.S. runs the Internet.

"What you're doing is feeding right into these other governments who are charging falsely that we control the Internet," Democratic Rep. Mike Doyle said.

At a hearing Thursday of a Senate Appropriations subcommittee, Republican Sen. Mark Kirk told Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker that he wants to ensure that "the essence of accountability to American values for an institution that we have built continues."

Pritzker told Kirk the U.S. would not let control over Internet addresses go to "a government or inter-governmental organization like the U.N."

The Internet was started by the Defense Department in the late 1960s. As its use spread beyond U.S. agencies, the U.S. government began reducing its management of the system and has been doing so ever since.

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