

ENDING THE GANG OF EIGHT

This is welcome news:

In a move that could spark another fight with the GOP over CIA intelligence and secrecy, House Dems are quietly preparing to make major changes to the ways the CIA briefs Congress on covert actions, by broadening the pool of members of Congress who will have access to such private briefings, a source familiar with deliberations says.

Dems on the House Intelligence Committee have drafted a new bill that would strip the President of his authority to limit such briefings to the so-called "Gang of Eight" – the leaders of the House and Senate from both parties, and the leaders of the Congressional Intelligence committees – and allow a larger group of members of Congress to attend.

The move, which is being championed internally by House Intel chair Silvestre Reyes, would also compel the CIA to keep a far more detailed record of these briefings, though these details still need to be worked out.

Greg predicts a partisan fight over this. But I'm actually more interested in how the Obama Administration will respond. After all, it has repeatedly defended the Bush Administration's interpretation that the Executive has fairly unlimited power to decide how to treat classified information and seems to be stonewalling any new legislation limiting state secrets. Eliminating the stupid Gang of Eight rule would be a significant check on the President's power to limit both the policy and political discussions on its secret programs. It would not surprise me all that much if the

Administration opposed this bill—and with Greg's predicted opposition from Republicans, it would make it hard to override a veto.

Nevertheless, this measure—had it been in place before the Bush Administration—might have limited some of the illegal measures Obama claims to oppose: the Iraq War, warrantless wiretapping, and torture. Eliminating the Gang of Eight brings a very manageable transparency to Executive Branch decisions—the kind of transparency that would do some real good.

So while I look forward to a bunch of hypocritical whining from Republicans about this, I'm much more interested in what response it elicits from the Obama Administration.