

Skirting immigration

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By **MIKE KELLY**



- Washington, D.C.

BRUCE DeCELL could not hold back. He knew he had an unpopular message. He knew he might get some angry looks. No matter.

Rollover photos to see larger image.



DeCell, of Staten Island, lost a son-in-law when the Twin Towers fell on Sept. 11, 2001. On a drizzly morning last week, he leaned against the doorway of a crowded basement room at the U.S. Capitol.

Before him stood other relatives of 9/11 victims., urging Congress to streamline America's spy agencies - a key reform sought by Tom Kean's Sept. 11 Commission to stop future terrorist attacks. But DeCell had another request: What about stopping illegal aliens?

"If the borders are open and thousands of people can come across every day, how does that protect us?" he asked.

Such a concern has become the 800-pound gorilla of Kean's commission, congressional reformers and even among 9/11 victims' families lobbying to change a bulky federal bureaucracy and enact tough anti-terror measures. What to do about America's lax immigration standards and porous borders?

The 19 Sept. 11 hijackers relied on all manner of cold-blooded cunning. But before stepping on the jetliners they hijacked, each faced this obstacle: How could they slip through America's border security?

The answer: Easily.

The 9/11 commission found that 15 of the 19 hijackers might have been stopped if the United States had even basic anti-terror procedures at checkpoints. But, as the commission discovered, there were too many loopholes. The hijackers, simply took advantage of America's tradition of openness and trust for foreign visitors.

Before Sept. 11, far too many visitors' visas were given by U.S. consulates with little or no background checks. Two hijackers, for instance, were able to get visas even though their names were already on a CIA anti-terror warning list. Four hijackers could have been nabbed if only U.S. authorities had better systems at airports for checking forged passports or even asking questions about suspicious travel patterns.

But perhaps the most telling finding by the commission was that 18 of the 19 hijackers managed to acquire some form of U.S. identification that allowed them to move freely around the nation, apply for credit cards, rent mailboxes and motel rooms, take flying lessons, obtain cell phones and buy airline tickets.

Some forms of ID, such as student visas, were all too easy to get. But others, including driver's licenses, were fakes - processed by fraudulent document dealers here in America. One such dealer from Paterson sold phony driver's licenses to two hijackers.

In the wake of such findings, federal and state agencies acted quickly to plug some loopholes. New Jersey's driver's licenses, for example, are now harder to duplicate. The Paterson document dealer was shut down. But widespread immigration reforms and border security measures still remain in limbo. Why?

The answer: politics.

Last week, a House-Senate conference committee gathered to try to piece together a bill that would set in place several key reforms sought by the 9/11 commission - notably a national intelligence director and a national counterterrorism center. But enacting tougher immigration standards was labeled "extraneous" or a "poison pill" by some lawmakers.

What few lawmakers would discuss was that the immigration reforms that might stop terrorists would also stop thousands of undocumented workers from coming to America to cut our lawns and work in our restaurants. To get tough on border security for terrorists would bring a much-needed spotlight on the plight and challenge of America's underground laborers, many from Latin America. It would also cost more tax dollars, especially if thousands of much-needed border guards are hired.

Sadly, few politicians want to shine the spotlight on the link between immigration and terrorism. Either they fear alienating many small businesses who rely on cheap labor or they fear alienating America's growing Latino population. Or they just don't want to spend more federal tax dollars and alienate tax-cutting conservatives.

Why would a smart politician want to risk losing support from such powerful constituencies? Why nudge this 800-pound political gorilla?

But smart politics is not necessarily smart anti-terrorism. Sure, many immigration reform measures are controversial. Some raise important - and serious - questions about civil liberties and personal privacy. But just because the questions are hard does not mean they should be ignored by Congress, especially as lawmakers debate the package of reforms sponsored by the 9/11 commission.

Standing with Bruce DeCell last week in that Capitol Hill doorway, Joan Molinaro of Staten Island, who lost her firefighter son on Sept. 11, had her own message to deliver. Without tougher border security, she said, the 9/11 reforms of spy agencies are just a façade.

"It's like a Hollywood set - all store fronts and nothing inside," she said.

Molinaro and DeCell are right. America needs better spy agencies to stop terrorists. But if Congress really wants to completely fix the problems that led to the Sept. 11 tragedy, it has to look to America's borders.

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