

ROLL CALL

Infighting Dooms Passage of Intel Bill Before Nov. 2

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The once hoped-for pre-Election Day enactment of a bill to implement the 9/11 commission's recommendations on intelligence reform now has become impossible, House and Senate staffers conceded yesterday, an admission that has only prompted a flare-up of the blame game between Members of Congress and family members of those killed in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Any floor votes on the intelligence bill will have to wait for a lame-duck session at the earliest, though conferees continued to huddle in secret yesterday, trying to reach an agreement that could be announced before most voters head to the polls on Nov. 2, aides said.

One senior House Republican aide said the ongoing negotiations are "still a steel-cage match" over how much power to give a newly created national intelligence director.

The Senate supports giving the NID the ability to formulate and execute the budgets of Defense-related intelligence agencies, while the House fears taking such authority away from the Defense secretary could impair war efforts.

Given the deadlocked state of the conference committee, Reps. Christopher Shays (R-Conn.) and Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.), the leaders of the House 9/11 Commission Caucus, put out an "I told you so" statement criticizing House Republican leaders for continuing to insist on the controversial provisions in their bill and blaming them for the conference committee's inability to come to an agreement this week.

"When the House was considering a bill divergent from the Senate version and the commission's recommendations, many of us warned that it would bog down security reform. It seems that those concerns were well founded. For security's sake, our nation needed quick action on the commission's most important recommendations. What we got instead were extraneous provisions and spotty negotiations," Shays and Maloney wrote.

Shays and Maloney unsuccessfully pushed to have the House adopt the Senate bill's language during that chamber's debate in September.

In the meantime, members of 9/11 Families for a Secure America traded accusations with representatives of the 9/11

Family Steering Committee about partisan motives and whether House and Senate conferees should adopt the Senate bill or the House bill — a fight that largely mirrors the stalemate in which conferees currently find themselves.

“It is unseemly to have a family feud going on on such a public stage,” acknowledged Debra Burlingame, whose brother was captain of the plane that crashed into the Pentagon on Sept. 11.

Still, Burlingame insisted that the issues at hand were too important to ignore. “We think these [other] families have been sold a bill of goods,” the FSA supporter said of the 9/11 Family Steering Committee.

Burlingame and FSA board members held a press conference Wednesday to push for action on contentious provisions in the House bill that would set new national requirements for driver’s licenses, beef up border security and curb immigration.

The Senate bill contains no such provisions. 9/11 Commission Chairman Tom Kean and Vice Chairman Lee Hamilton have said they oppose the inclusion of the House’s border-security and driver’s-license language, because it was not included in the commission’s recommendations and could lead to a stalemate in conference committee.

FSA members also sought to refute statements by Steering Committee members, who have repeatedly said President Bush and House Republican leaders should be held responsible for the failure to enact the intelligence reform measure before Nov. 2.

Saying the Steering Committee was pushing for completion of the bill by an arbitrary deadline, FSA board member Colette Lafuente said the border security and drivers license provisions “are so important to this bill, they are worth waiting for and they are worth fighting for.”

But when asked where the FSA stood on the central sticking point between House and Senate conferees — the powers of the NID — Lafuente acknowledged that she has “not studied either bill. ... I leave that up to the Congresspeople.”

Beverly Eckert, a board member of the Steering Committee and a member of FSA, said FSA has “lost sight of what’s really important, which is a strong intelligence director.” Eckert and other Steering Committee representatives took to the podium immediately after the FSA press conference for their own impromptu media availability.

But it wasn’t all substance at the dueling press conferences.

Burlingame and other FSA members said they object to statements like those of Steering Committee member Mary Fetchet who asked on Wednesday, “Why hasn’t the president demanded to implement these reforms and have a bill on his desk? Why can’t he control a Republican House?”

“They’re very political, hanging it all on the president and Republicans in Congress,” Burlingame said. “They know that if they frame it in terms of election-year politics, they’ll get better media coverage, and they’ll be able to pressure elected officials to get their way.”

Fetchet pointed out that Burlingame is no stranger to partisan politics either. Burlingame spoke in favor of President Bush at the Republican National Convention in August.

But Lafuente, Burlingame, and FSA board member Joan Molinaro also questioned whether the Steering Committee, which only lists 12 members on its Web site, really represents the thousands of families who lost loved ones in the attacks. FSA claims to represent more than 300 families.

However, the Steering Committee has been credited with being the driving force that successfully lobbied a reluctant Republican Congress and White House to create the 9/11 commission in the first place.

House Intelligence Chairman Pete Hoekstra (R-Mich.), who also serves as conference committee chairman, was scheduled to join the FSA press conference, but did not show up.