



Good intentions, then gridlock on 9/11 reforms

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By **MIKE KELLY**

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The sun was shining, birds were chirping, and Republicans and Democrats were actually speaking kindly to each other about how to fix America's anti-terror security net.

Then a woman in the back spoke up.

"Those bastards killed my son," Joan Molinaro said of the Islamic terrorists behind the Sept. 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center that took the life of her firefighter son, Carl. "You're making a mistake."

It was only a brief exchange between a victim's mother and a handful of lawmakers trying to sculpt anti-terror legislation to coincide with recommendations by Tom Kean's 9/11 commission. But the testiness may be a sign of things to come.

The bipartisan cooperation that Kean's commission tried so hard to promote is barely clinging to life on Capitol Hill this week. Indeed, it may already be dead. House and Senate lawmakers are practically thumbing their noses at each other as each body takes divergent paths to reform U.S. spy agencies - paths that are so different that compromise seems all but impossible without one side backing down.

Meanwhile, Republicans in each body are fighting among themselves over political turf. So are Democrats.

And on Tuesday the families of 9/11 victims joined the fray.

The scene was the sun-washed granite terrace of the Cannon Office Building, across Independence Avenue from the Capitol and its marble dome. A handful of Republican and Democratic House members, including Rep. Rush Holt, D-Mercer, gathered with several victims' relatives to call for tougher intelligence reforms.

Joan Molinaro listened quietly, then could not hold back any longer. Besides streamlined intelligence services, she wanted tougher controls on immigration and how states issue driver's licenses.

"Fill the holes," she said of the proposed legislation. "My son is dead."

How to fill those holes in America's security net - indeed, which holes to fill first - has become a major question for lawmakers here.

A Senate bill would create a new director to oversee America's 15 major spy agencies, but does not address security for immigration and driver's licenses - two gaps exploited by the 9/11 hijackers. The House version enacts tougher standards for immigration and licenses, but waters down the power of the nation's intelligence chief.



Supporters of the Senate bill say the House is acting irresponsibly by inserting "poison pill" amendments. Supporters of the House bill say the Senate is not tough enough.

And that's just the beginning.

On Tuesday, Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, who chairs the influential Appropriations Committee, even took aim at fellow Republican Kean and commission Vice Chairman Lee Hamilton, a Democrat, for proposing to take away some of his power over funding for spy agencies.

"We're under pressure from two men whose business was through when they filed their report," Stevens said in a Senate floor speech.

To Stevens and other veteran lawmakers - even fellow Republicans - now balking at realigning the Capitol Hill power grid, Kean fired off a terse retort.

"They really don't want to give up power," Kean said. "It's not partisan. It's the old guys who have the power, and they just don't want to give it up."

What seems certain is that the infighting that has plagued Congress for years threatens to poison this issue and could delay or derail the extensive reforms called for by the 9/11 commission.

Two Democratic members of the commission, Tim Roemer and Richard Ben-Veniste, joined others on the terrace at the Cannon building Tuesday and accused House Republican leaders of trying to turn 9/11 reforms into partisan election war.

"Let us bring out the best in America that emerged after Sept. 11," Roemer said.

Ben-Veniste added that politicizing the 9/11 commission's proposed reforms for "purported partisan advantage" will "not only be a shame, but it will be shameful."

For victims' families, watching the process of congressional legislation has not been easy.

Like Joan Molinaro, Peter Gadiel of Connecticut, whose 23-year-old son James died in the trade center, interrupted the gathering of lawmakers to call for tougher immigration standards.

"Some other child is going to die," Gadiel shouted. "The borders are unprotected."

Roemer answered that the commission also called for tougher immigration standards but that intelligence reforms should get top priority now.

"We want a whole bill, not half a bill," Gadiel shot back.

It was just the sort of angry frustration that many victims' relatives have tried hard to avoid. Yet for many relatives, such anger was hardly surprising.

"On Sept. 11, I not only lost my husband but my faith in government," said Beverly Eckert.

Eckert's husband, insurance executive Sean Rooney, died in the south tower. The two had been high school sweethearts. To campaign for improved security, Eckert quit her job as an insurance executive and has made so many trips to Washington she stopped counting.

On Tuesday, she returned again.

"This is the culmination of everything we've worked for," she said after spending the morning trying to lobby House members to vote for a tough spy chief.

It was now midafternoon. Eckert leaned against a wall and tried to rest.

She said she still believes Congress wants to "make our country safe." Eckert paused, then frowned.

"But there is a wide difference of how to get there."

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