

Kansas City Star

Dawdling incenses Sept. 11 families

By Rhonda Chriss Lokeman | Dec 5, 2004

It's just not that important to lawmakers that we have intelligence reform by year's end. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. As Joan Molinaro spoke at a press conference about the loss of her firefighter-son three Septembers ago, you could tell she was seeing red. When she made an impassioned plea to spare her other children, you would have thought she was appealing to some unknown psychopath, not U.S. lawmakers.

"You allowed the murder of my son. I will not allow you to kill my daughters," she said. Molinaro directed her wrath at lawmakers in the U.S. House. The House has held up intelligence reforms including some recommended by the Sept. 11 commission. Unlike the Senate bill, parts of which look like it was written by the bipartisan commission, the House bill appears to have been co-written by divorce attorneys trying to divide assets. It's so partisan and picked over, and the parties haven't finished arguing.

President Bush said he would work to get Republican leaders to push a bill forward. But by now most Americans ought to be used to this good-cop-bad-cop routine by Republican leaders in the Congress and White House. It's more instructive to watch what Bush does rather than listen to what he says. So when the House returns this week, don't expect any big news. It's just not that important to lawmakers that we have intelligence reform by year's end.

The political shell game that continues to put our nation at risk understandably has many Sept. 11 families upset. It has been a long three years.

First the families begged for an independent commission to investigate the terror attacks and the government's responses. Then they begged for an extension of the commission to complete its job. Next they watched the Bush administration stonewall commissioners and pull executive rank to keep its people from appearing before the commission.

Finally, when the commission, using lessons learned, provided a report with mostly common-sense recommendations, the families watched congressional lawmakers hem and haw. Three years after the Sept. 11 attacks, our government is failing us again.

Most families of the Sept. 11 dead want improved national security. Most want genuine reform, not something passed for the sake of saying lawmakers did something.

But Molinaro is among those who would rather lawmakers put off legislation rather than pass something weak on immigration and thereby allow potential terrorists to unlawfully enter the country or overstay their welcome as they plot further violence.

Molinaro said: "No bill should pass the Senate, the House, anywhere unless it contains immigration reform. You secure our borders. You keep my girls alive."

The way our elected leaders have handled this has not been good for the country. It certainly hasn't been good for families who lost loved ones after Sept. 11. The families used to speak as a united front. Now they've splintering into different groups with different agendas. There's the 9/11 Families for a Secure America, Molinaro's group, and also the Family Steering Committee for the 9/11 Commission.

If lawmakers thought hell hath no fury like mother Molinaro, they haven't gotten an earful from the widow Eckert.

Beverly Eckert lost her husband at the World Trade Center. Aligned with the Family Steering Committee for the 9/11 Commission, she has been livid about the delays in getting anti-terror legislation, especially intelligence reforms, through Congress.

"We're outraged," she told reporters. "We were told it might not happen until next year. That's a code for 'slow walk this bill to death.' The clock is ticking. Our message is one of urgency."

While Congress dickers and dawdles, families of Sept. 11 victims seethe. Some agree with Molinaro's group that legislative haste makes waste. Others agree with Eckert's group that you've got to start somewhere now not later. Meanwhile, the Sept. 11 commission, led by Thomas Kean, believes time isn't on our side.

The usually patient, patrician Tom Kean looks like he could blow a gasket any day. Kean usually chooses his words carefully, but last week he didn't pull any punches. Annoyed by the delays, Kean warned, "We can't play Russian roulette here by waiting until next year."

He dug into his doomsday bag and pulled out this gem: "We are going to be attacked again. If we don't do what we can to prepare ourselves, then government has not then performed its first duty, which is to protect its citizens."

Some in government have a duty first to their party. House Speaker Dennis Hastert is among them. The Republican blocked an intelligence bill from a floor vote on Nov. 20. National Public Radio's Ron Elvin reported that a Hastert spokesman said he was reluctant to bring the measure up for a vote because Republicans were against it and Democrats might have gotten credit for it passing.

So it's less important to take measures to better secure the nation than to do what's necessary to better secure the Grand Old Party. Through his intervention, Hastert gave fellow Republican Reps. Duncan Hunter and Jim Sensenbrenner Jr. more time to suck their thumbs.

Hunter, California chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and Wisconsin's Sensenbrenner, House Judiciary Committee chairman, say House legislation confuses matters by not providing clearer requirements of the proposed intelligence czar and his or her interactions with the Pentagon. They contend that proposed reforms would weaken immigration. Rep. Ike Skelton, a Missouri Democrat and Armed Services member, has been helping to work on a compromise. Good luck, Ike!

Meanwhile, outside the nation's Capitol a mob of angry women is advancing. Be afraid, Mr. Hastert, be very afraid!

Rhonda Chriss Lokeman's column appears on Sundays. To reach her, call **(816) 234-4475**, or send e-mail to **lokeman@kcstar.com**.

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