

Crossfire, December 2004
BEGALA: Welcome back to CROSSFIRE.

September 11 Commission members are launching a lobbying blitz to try to push Congress into passing intelligence reform legislation this year, rather than starting over from scratch next year. But there are deep divisions over the legislation, including among family members of 9/11 victims.

Joining us now to debate the issue, Kristen Breitweiser, whose husband was killed in those attacks, and **Peter Gadiel**, who lost his son on September 11 and who now heads the group 9/11 Families For a Secure America.

Thank you very much.

(CROSSTALK)

CARLSON: Ms. Breitweiser, thanks a lot for joining us.

First, I want to ask you quickly about the resignation today of Tom Ridge. It seems to me that there can be bipartisan consensus on the sort of job he did. Republicans, Democrats, even you -- I know you were supportive of the John Kerry campaign. I think you did would admit that the only measure of a public servant's sort of tenure is the results.

And the result after more than three years of having Tom Ridge at the end of the department is no terrorist attacks in the United States. By that measure, the only one that matters, doesn't he get an A?

KRISTEN BREITWEISER, 9/11 WIDOW: I really would rather not comment on director Ridge's grade.

What I would like to say is that I think everyone needs to recognize the current environment we're in. That is a transition period, where we have people like Director Ridge stepping down. We have a national security adviser moving over to the secretary of state position. We have the CIA with a new director, CIA agents dropping like flies. We have the holidays coming up.

And, more importantly, we have two UBL tapes, one as recent as yesterday, one from a couple weeks before, around the election. This is a very hostile environment. That's why we need this legislation to go through. That's why all of our members of Congress, all of the American people and the president need to recognize that this bill needs to get passed and it needs to get passed now.

BEGALA: Mr. Gadiel, let me ask you about, rather than rating Tom Ridge, let's look at his successor.

Do you think it ought to be another former politician, like Ridge or maybe Asa Hutchinson, the No. 2 there, or maybe somebody a little larger than life, like General Barry McCaffrey, who I suggested earlier in the program, who actually knows something about national defense? Wouldn't that be helpful?

(CROSSTALK)

PETER GADIEL, 9/11 FAMILIES FOR A SECURE AMERICA: You really have me caught short here.

I couldn't possibly comment on who his successor should be. I mean, it's really just - I couldn't possibly give an educated opinion on that. Should it be somebody who knows what he's doing? Yes. That's obvious, that he has to have certain requirements. But which of these is qualified and which is not, I wouldn't want to...

(CROSSTALK)

BEGALA: Good enough. Fair for you.

CARLSON: Ms. Breitweiser, you said you want to see a bill passed no matter what, and you want to see it passed quick. You would agree, though, that better to have good legislation passed and bad legislation stalled. Don't you think any legislation that passes ought to do something about the easy availability of driver's licenses?

The nineteen hijackers, many of them got American driver's licenses and used them, of course, for foul ends. Shouldn't this legislation prevent that, keep illegal aliens from getting driver's licenses? And it doesn't.

BREITWEISER: I think, rather than focusing on the thing that this legislation does not handle, which is the driver's licenses to illegal immigrants, you should focus on what this bill does do.

It effectively reallocates funding for Border Patrol. It sets up cargo screening for ships, for airplanes. It does a whole host of things. It puts up a DNI, which is something that this nation's intelligence apparatus sorely lacks. We lacked it before 9/11. We had no one connecting the dots, which is why, to this day, we still do not have one person setting overriding strategy for our intelligence community. That is the biggest part of this legislation. So, you are arguing that one thing, giving driver's licenses to illegal immigrants, should hold up a whole host of things that will make this nation safe at a time when we are very vulnerable. We are as vulnerable as we were on 9/11. And I think that that's unreasonable.

BEGALA: Mr. Gadiel, let me actually first play a piece of tape a Republican congressman, Chris Shays, who spoke today about who will be to blame if this bill dies. Here's Congressman Shays from your home state of Connecticut.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

REP. CHRISTOPHER SHAYS (R), CONNECTICUT: If we don't have a vote on September 11, it will be my feeling that the president didn't weigh in strong enough.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BEGALA: Now, unlike you -- you have a principled position. I happen to disagree with it, but you want this bill killed. And you have honestly petitioned your government to kill the bill. Good for you.

Isn't it pretty duplicitous of the president, who is quietly killing this bill while pretending to support it? Isn't that pretty cowardly of the president?

GADIEL: You know, I -- certainly, George Bush is no friend of immigration reform.

But I really have to respond to Ms. Breitweiser's massive misrepresentation of the two bills, the House and Senate. The House bill had not just driver's license reforms, but a whole host of border security measures. And the Senate bill doesn't just lack driver's licenses provisions. It lacks everything.

There are -- a token increase in Border Patrol, but that's it. That's all. The House has compromised and compromised and compromised, but it's the Senate, obstructionists in the Senate, like Lieberman and Collins and Shays, who refuse to have any border security measure in this bill whatsoever.

Now, I know that Ms. Breitweiser has been quoted in the past as saying that border security measures are extremely important. And the 9/11 Commission in its report spoke of terrorist travel and that travel documents are as important as weapons to such people, so that what we're saying is, we don't -- it's not that we oppose a bill. We oppose this flawed bill, which is half a bill.

It does not include any recommendations for border security whatsoever.

(CROSSTALK)

BREITWEISER: Again, and I think that that -- respectfully, I think that that's an example of Mr. Gadiel being myopic in his view.

You are talking -- one thing I think Peter and I can agree on is that the 9/11 families were unable to hold anyone accountable. What the 9/11 Commission found was that everyone was at fault; therefore, no one was at fault. And so -- we can also agree probably that someone failed to connect the dots, which is why the most important thing that this bill will do is give this country a director of national intelligence.

That person will be held accountable for future attacks. That person will be establishing a broad strategy to defend ourselves against terrorists. That person will be held responsible, so that, going forward, the next set of victims will know that there are people in place who are held accountable for their actions when we get attacked by terrorists. And to hold up this legislation, to leave this country at such great risk for one issue, it's very unreasonable.

BEGALA: Mr. Gadiel, why not come back and fight next year for this one issue and consolidate these gains that everybody agrees you need?

GADIEL: If everybody agrees we need them, let's do them now.

BEGALA: Right.

GADIEL: The real reason that this is not being done now is because people don't want to address the issue.

The real reason that Senator Lieberman and Mr. Shays don't want to address this issue now is, they don't want to address this bill -- that issue -- ever. There will be only one 9/11 implementation act, and this is it. If it doesn't include everything, it's not going to include this. There should be no -- Mrs. Breitweiser is very naive if she thinks that, in January, if we pass this bill now, that she's going to come back with

us and ask people like Shays and Lieberman and Collins, will you now pass border security measures? No, they won't. They'll discard them.

BREITWEISER: Look, the bottom line is -- the bottom line is, Peter, we started lobbying for the 9/11 Commission in the 107th Congress. It took us two years to get this commission report. It's taken us a number of months since the release of the commission report to get this enacted into actual legislation that could get passed.

We have the American people behind this. We have the president behind it. We have the majority of the Congress behind this. There is no reason why this bill should be hung up and there's no reason why you can't come back to the 109th Congress and fight for your legislation.

(CROSSTALK)

CARLSON: Ms. Breitweiser, Mr. Gadiel, thank you. I'm sorry. We are out of time. We appreciate your coming in very much.

BREITWEISER: Thanks very much. CARLSON: Canadians aren't much for fighting in Iraq, but they do know how to throw a good protest. They're throwing one today. It probably seemed like a good way to stay warm. We'll talk with an actual Canadian -- we've got one -- about President Bush's visit there today just ahead.

And Wolf Blitzer will tell us who is accusing the United States of torture in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

WOLF BLITZER, CNN ANCHOR: I'm Wolf Blitzer in Washington.

Coming up at the top of the hour, the country's first homeland security secretary is stepping down. Who will replace Tom Ridge in this critical role?

Shocking allegations from the International Committee for the Red Cross, accusing the U.S. military of what amounts to torture at Guantanamo Bay.

And a twist in the case of a young Florida teacher accused of having sex with a student.

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