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PAULA ZAHN NOW

Dan Rather Steps Down; Bush Agenda Hits a Roadblock

Aired November 23, 2004 - 20:00 ET

When we come back, the blame game, power politics and our nation's security, or lack thereof. Josh Rushing.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

ZAHN: The political battle over reforming the nation's intelligence system continued again today. The White House says President Bush is trying to persuade House Republicans to revive the bill they blocked over the

weekend.

If the bill eventually passes, the Pentagon would lose some turf to a new national intelligence director, and today, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld tried to play the good soldier.

Here's senior Pentagon correspondent Jamie McIntyre.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

JAMIE MCINTYRE, CNN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): The Pentagon is worried that the rapid flow of real time battlefield intelligence, the kind U.S. military commanders used to win a swift victory in Falluja, could be more cumbersome if a separate national security czar is in charge.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who opposed the plan, insists once President Bush decided to support it, he saluted smartly.

RUMSFELD: Needless to say, I'm a part of this administration. I support the president's position.

MCINTYRE: Rumsfeld bristled at charges leveled by Connecticut Congressman Christopher Shays that he blatantly opposed the Senate version of the bill supported by the White House and flatly denied a "New York Times" editorial that said, "Despite Mr. Rumsfeld's denials, it seems obvious he lobbied against the president's stated policy."

RUMSFELD: "The New York Times" is wrong. The Congressmen who are saying that I had blatant opposition to the bill is incorrect.

MCINTYRE (on camera): Joint Chiefs Chairman General Richard Myers did support a House version opposed by the White House, which keeps Pentagon control of battlefield intelligence.

(voice-over) In a letter requested by and sent to Republican Congressman Duncan Hunter, Myers writes, "The House bill maintains this vital flow through the secretary of defense. It is my recommendation that this critical provision be preserved."

But General Myers, unlike Rumsfeld, is required by Congress not to allow politics to influence his military advice.

GEN. RICHARD MYERS, CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS: Chairman Hunter called and asked for my opinion on a certain matter that related to intel reform. And I was obliged to give him my opinion. And I did that.

MCINTYRE: The White House says neither Rumsfeld nor Myers are in any trouble, because both expressed their concerns properly.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

ZAHN: And that report was from our own Jamie McIntyre.

The intelligence reform bill is a result of the recommendations of the final report of the 9/11 Commission. But even some family members of 9/11 victims disagree on the proposed reforms.

Joining me are two people who lost family members to the 9/11 attacks, Kristen Breitweiser, whose husband was killed, and Joan Molinaro, who lost her son.

Thank you. I know how hard it is for both of you to relive all of this debate.

I know, Kristen, you're unhappy this bill hasn't passed. Why?

KRISTEN BREITWEISER, 9/11 WIDOW: Because our nation is still at great risk from terrorist organizations.

We had a president who supported this bill. The 9/11 families supported this bill. We had all of Congress, all of the American people supporting this bill. And because two rogue congressmen in the House decided to add on poison pills, it didn't get done.

So we lay at risk at this time of a transition period, with the UBL tape coming out a couple of weeks ago, with the holidays coming up, with people at the CIA dropping like flies, and we are at great risk because our intelligence community is broken and it needs to be fixed.

ZAHN: Joan, do you think this bill would make all of us safer?

JOAN MOLINARO, SON DIED ON 9/11: No.

ZAHN: Why?

MOLINARO: Because it's lacking in immigration reform and driver's license reform, which were among the issues that the 9/11 Commission reported that we needed reform in.

The problem isn't intelligence. It was there before 9/11. They knew the possibility of planes being used as missiles, and nothing was done about it. The information was there.

Condoleezza Rice said, "If we had known that they would do this, we could have done something." Well, they did know, but because al Qaeda didn't give them a date and time, I guess the intelligence figured they didn't have enough information.

You need to keep the people out of the country to protect this country because, once they're in here, they're lost. We can't find them. We cannot have another visa express.

ZAHN: Do you think the bill would have been stronger if it included some of the things Joan's talking about?

BREITWEISER: I think the bill actually did include immigration reform. It included...

ZAHN: But Joan clearly didn't think enough.

BREITWEISER: It included reallocation of budget to the border control. What it didn't include was the driver's license provision, and that is a very hotly debated topic.

You're talking about using a driver's license, something that we use to let people drive cars, and turning that into a national I.D. That is something that needs lively debate. It needs -- the public needs to get involved with that. And it's stalling this very important bill.

And the bottom line is Joan is correct on saying that we lack a strategy. We lack someone to task people like Condoleezza Rice and the FBI and the CIA to say, "Tell me more about these people. Vet everything. Let me know what your files say about planes being used as missiles. What is border control telling us?"

With a DNI, with this legislation, we would have this person.

ZAHN: Do you think this national intelligence czar would make it easier for the whole intelligence community to connect the dots? Because in her testimony, Condoleezza Rice said, "Yes, we knew some of this stuff, but we could not put it all together." MOLINARO: No, I don't see why creating another figurehead is going to make connecting the dots a possibility. They should have been connected before. The people in the intelligence before 9/11 failed to do their job.

BREITWEISER: You had Condoleezza Rice testifying and saying that no one told her to tell the FBI to look in their files. A DNI would tell Condoleezza Rice, our national security adviser, to look into these things. That's why we need a DNI.

And what we need is the president to make his stand clear on where he stands on immigration reform and where he stands with regard to DOD. Dennis Hastert needs to bring this to a vote and let the American people see how each one of our elected officials votes on this issue.

ZAHN: Joan, a final thought on what it's like for your families to have to relive this and to find yourselves having to debate each other, those of you who have been touched so deeply by this horrible tragedy.

MOLINARO: It's very hard. And the one thing you don't want to do is go against another 9/11 family member.

But not all the 9/11 family -- families support the Senate bill. And 9/11 Family Members for a Secure America applaud Sensenbrenner and Hunter for having the backbone to stand up for a correct bill, not any bill, but a just bill.

ZAHN: My heart goes out to all of your families. I know that your feelings are still raw and to have to continue to debate this on a daily basis cannot be easy. I hope you find some peace during this Thanksgiving holiday.

BREITWEISER: Thank you.

ZAHN: Thank you, Joan. Thank you, Kristen.

We're going to take a short break. We'll be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)