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Bush Vows Action on Intelligence Bill



Joan Molinaro holds a photo of her grandchildren at a 9/11 Families for a Secure America news conference

President to Seek Support of Frist and Hastert

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President Bush, facing pressure to do more to enact a stalled bill that would restructure the nation's intelligence community, said yesterday he will ask Congress's top two leaders to help pass the measure by next week.

Meanwhile, Vice President Cheney, meeting with leaders of the Sept. 11 commission, underscored the administration's support for the bill, according to commission Chairman Thomas H. Kean and Vice Chairman Lee H. Hamilton.

Bush's and Cheney's comments come as several lawmakers, commission members, terrorism victims' families and others say the White House must put more force behind its stated support of the bill, which stalled 10 days ago in the House.

The president "needs to come before our conference [of House Republicans]" to insist on the bill's passage, Rep. Christopher Shays (R-Conn.) said yesterday.

But Bush, speaking to reporters during a visit to Canada, said he now plans to deal with House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) and Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.). "Let's see if I can say it as plainly as I can," Bush said. "I am for the intelligence bill."

He noted that he spoke last month with two lawmakers who later were crucial in sidetracking the bill in a closed meeting of House Republicans on Nov. 20: Armed Services Committee Chairman Duncan Hunter (Calif.) and Judiciary Chairman F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. (Wis.).

"I believe the bill is necessary and important, and hope we can get it done next week," Bush continued. "And I look forward to talking to Speaker Hastert and Leader Frist here before the week is out to express to them why I just told you in public I'm for the bill again."

Strong presidential pressure would put Hastert in a difficult spot. The speaker supports the bill, which resulted from long House-Senate negotiations, but he kept the House from voting on it Nov. 20 when Hunter, Sensenbrenner and other GOP lawmakers spoke against it.

Hastert acknowledged the measure probably would have passed with strong Democratic support, but he said he would insist on "a majority of the majority" before taking it to the House floor. Bush's efforts could force Hastert to abandon that principle or to defy his president's wishes.

With the 108th Congress scheduled to meet next week for a final session, there were dueling news conferences yesterday by groups representing relatives of victims of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The Family Steering Committee supports the compromise bill; 9/11 Families for a Secure America opposes it, saying it does too little to control borders and immigration.

In a separate news conference, Hamilton said there had been little change in the intelligence community since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. "The status quo is that the intelligence community is basically structured the same way it was before 9/11," he said.

But officials in the administration and intelligence community say there have been extensive changes since the attacks. The USA Patriot Act eliminated perceived barriers to the FBI and CIA sharing intelligence and grand jury information. Recruiting and training of CIA analysts and case officers were increased, aided recently by a presidential order to have those groups grow by 50 percent.

The Department of Homeland Security was established, and the Terrorist Threat Integration Center, under the control of the director of central intelligence, became the primary analytic group for terrorist intelligence, gathered domestically or abroad. It is staffed not only by CIA and FBI personnel, but also by representatives of domestic agencies involved with immigration and customs.

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