
October 28, 2004

9/11 Families Group Rebukes Bush for Impasse on Overhaul

By PHILIP SHENON

WASHINGTON, Oct. 27 - The principal advocacy group for families of victims of the Sept. 11 attacks blamed President Bush and a group of House Republicans on Wednesday for the failure of Congress to approve a bill to enact the recommendations of the bipartisan Sept. 11 commission and overhaul the nation's intelligence agencies.

In a statement clearly meant to influence voters in next week's election, the group did not explicitly endorse Senator John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate, but said Mr. Bush had "allowed members of his own party to derail the legislative process."

The statement, which also singled out Speaker J. Dennis Hastert and five other House Republicans for blame, said, "The president never took time from his campaign to come to Washington himself to see this through," adding: "Election Day is imminent. Now it's our turn."

Efforts by House and Senate negotiators to work out a compromise bill appeared close to collapse on Wednesday, with lawmakers at a stalemate over the powers of a proposed national intelligence director and other issues.

Asked about the group's criticism of the president, a White House spokeswoman, Erin Healy, suggested that Mr. Bush did not deserve the families' blame, and that he had been active in encouraging Congress to agree on a final bill.

"He has urged the House and Senate to come together and resolve their differences," she said. "The administration has been actively engaged in this. We've been up on the Hill. We've been taking part in the conferees' process."

The Kerry campaign instantly seized on the families' statement to attack President Bush. Mark Kitchens, a spokesman for the Kerry campaign, said it showed that "George Bush has squandered this golden opportunity to achieve meaningful and lasting intelligence reform."

John Feehery, a spokesman for the speaker, said the families' criticism of Mr. Hastert was "unfair because the speaker and his staff have been negotiating day and night to get a bill

that will make the country safer."

No advocacy group claims to speak for all relatives of victims of the Sept. 11 attacks. But the leaders of the Family Steering Committee - in particular, four New Jersey widows who became known as "the Jersey girls" - were instrumental in pressuring Congress and the White House to create the Sept. 11 commission in late 2002, and in insisting that the commission be aggressive in demanding documents and testimony from the Bush administration.

Their statement, the most pointedly political one ever issued by the committee, said the group's members were "angry and saddened that the opportunity for significant reform of our country's intelligence structure has been squandered." Nikki Stern, leader of another large victims' family group, Families of September 11, said that her group's nonprofit status barred her from urging voters to support or oppose individual political candidates.

"But we do say that those people who are responsible for not helping push through legislation that supports the 9/11 commission will be held accountable on Nov. 2," she said. "We're encouraging everyone to vote."

Congressional negotiators have been meeting for a week to try to reconcile House and Senate bills intended to enact major recommendations of the Sept. 11 commission, most importantly its call for the creation of the job of a national intelligence director to coordinate the work of the government's 15 spy agencies, including the C.I.A. Congressional leaders had asked that a final bill be ready in time for it to be signed into law by President Bush before the election on Tuesday.

But lawmakers say the talks have been at a virtual standstill this week, with House Republicans refusing to accept the wording of the bipartisan Senate bill, which would grant broader budget and personnel authority to a national intelligence director than would the House bill.

House Republicans say they have been willing to make concessions about the intelligence director's authority, but that they cannot make concessions that would hamper the work of intelligence agencies within the Pentagon, like the National Security Agency.

Their position has been endorsed by senior officials at the Pentagon, which has proved awkward for the White House to explain in recent days since President Bush has offered his public support to the Senate provisions, which have also been endorsed by the Sept. 11 commission. The House Republicans have also insisted on the inclusion in a final bill of several law-enforcement and immigration provisions from the House bill that have been strongly criticized by civil liberties groups and were never addressed by the commission.

