

## **CONGRESS LOOKS AT ITS OWN VULNERABILITY TO ATTACK**

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WASHINGTON -- Members of Congress who have spent the last month considering measures to combat terrorism are now beginning to come to grips with the notion that protecting democracy also means protecting themselves.

The terrorist attacks Sept. 11 made glaringly obvious how few preparations have been made to preserve the nation's legislative branch in a crisis. While President Bush was whisked to the safety of a military base and Vice President Cheney to a fortified room at the White House, most lawmakers were left to wander aimlessly outside their freshly evacuated office buildings. Many now believe that the Capitol might have been a target of the hijacked plane that passengers forced into a crash landing in Pennsylvania.

"In truth, we didn't perform well, and we know that," House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, D-Mo., says.

A second evacuation several days later, for a bomb scare, wasn't much more reassuring. Meetings were still underway on the House side of the Capitol while senators and their staff scampered out of the building. Eventually, House and Senate members ended up standing on the lawn, where the only shelter was the overhanging branches of a few stately trees.

But in the wake of the last month's attacks on major American landmarks, lawmakers have begun to focus on ensuring that the nation's legislative branch continues

functioning if they or their workplaces fall victim to terrorism.

A task force on Capitol Hill security has received more than 500 suggestions from members and aides. They range from improving the communications system to an admittedly "doomsday scenario" constitutional amendment offered by Rep. Brian Baird, D-Wash. It would let governors name replacements if more than 25% of the 435 House members were killed or incapacitated.

"Our whole consciousness level has been raised," Rep. J.C. Watts, R-Okla., says. "We need to make sure that in time of crisis, we can operate as a democracy."

The White House budget office may propose new funding for Capitol Hill security this week. Other new security measures include:

- \* Traffic around the Capitol has been severely restricted. Most trucks are banned from a 40-block surrounding area.

- \* Tourists, who once thronged the Capitol, are now admitted only to view the House and Senate when they are in session (tickets must be obtained from lawmakers) or for small guided tours offered during limited hours.

- \* Concerns about letter bombs and anthrax are prompting new procedures for dealing with Congress' huge volume of mail. "It's being doubled-checked . . . before it arrives in our offices," Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-N.Y., says. Lawmakers also were told to be "extra cautious" with the mail they receive, especially anything that arrives without a return address.

- \* Lawmakers have received advice about lowering their profiles. Some have

replaced the special license plates that identify them as members of Congress with more anonymous tags.

\* The public address system has been improved, the better to sound any alarms. Members also have been given Blackberry handheld computers to improve communications during emergencies.

\* Windows in the Capitol were coated with Mylar last week to prevent them from shattering.

\* The National Guard may be called in temporarily to spell members of the Capitol Police, who have worked 12-hour shifts for more than a month.

\* And in a move that officials say was planned before Sept. 11, but may have been speeded up in the wake of the terror attacks, the Capitol underwent a laser scan last month. It will enable the Capitol architect to recreate a three-dimensional reproduction of the 201-year-old building's exterior, accurate to within three-sixteenths of an inch. That could make it easier to reconstruct one of the leading symbols of American democracy.

Lawmakers insist they've received no special personal protections against terrorist attacks: no anthrax vaccinations, no biohazard suits. The much-reported stash of gas masks in the Capitol is a cache that was placed there years ago against the possibility of an attack during a joint session of Congress, when the president and other top government officials might be present. Most lawmakers professed no knowledge of their existence.

Capitol Hill Police spokesman Dan Nichols wouldn't comment on the gas masks. But he argued that there's nothing wrong with taking special measures to

protect lawmakers in the event of an emergency. "There is a continuity-of-government issue," he says.

Congressional leaders say members won't be left standing on street corners if the 19-building Capitol Hill campus is evacuated again. "We're better prepared than we were on the 11th," says Rep. Bob Ney, R-Ohio, chairman of the Committee on House Administration. Among the issues Ney and other leaders have been mulling: alternative meeting places for Congress, both inside and outside Washington.

"We need a permanent plan," Gephardt says.

Congress used to have one. In 1962, just before the Cuban missile crisis, finishing touches were put on an elaborate 112,000-square-foot subterranean bunker where Congress was to repair in case of nuclear war. Underneath the Greenbrier resort in West Virginia, the secret Capitol featured separate chambers for the House and Senate, communications gear, hospital facilities and bunk beds for members and a few aides.

It's now a tourist attraction. Guided tours are offered for \$ 25. "It would take some work" to make it suitable for Congress to use, Greenbrier spokeswoman Lynn Swann says. "The communications and security equipment are all gone."

Congressional scholar Norman Ornstein says lawmakers should "come up with some action plans," including Baird's amendment to allow for quick replacement of House members. Governors can fill vacancies in the Senate, but the Constitution requires that House members be elected, a process that could take months.

"It's human nature not to want to think about awful things happening to you," Ornstein says.