

**IN STATE OF SIEGE, CONGRESS  
PONDERS 'DOOMSDAY  
SCENARIO'**

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WASHINGTON - For the first time since the Civil War, Congress is living through a state of siege, scrambling to protect itself and even contemplating a "doomsday scenario":

What would happen if the legislative branch of government were destroyed or crippled?

That notion seemed outlandish until terrorists targeted the nation's capital with a fuel-laden airliner and virulent anthrax spores arrived in a Senate mailroom.

Now, as senators and staffers swallow Cipro and inspectors with gauze pads search for lethal bacteria in the empty halls of Congress, all bets are off.

Through decades of wars, invasion, shootings and bombings, the House had never been closed because of the threat of an attack - until this month.

One congressman has even urged his colleagues to "think the unthinkable," offering a constitutional amendment to reconstitute the House if 25 percent or more of its members are killed or incapacitated.

"It's difficult to think about a catastrophic attack on the Capitol, but if more than a quarter of us are killed, we would need an absolutely clear constitutional mechanism to get the government up and running," said Rep. Brian Baird, D-Wash.

If Congress suffered major losses, governors could quickly appoint new senators, but representatives must be elected, and state laws set the rules for special elections that often take months.

Baird's propose amendment empowers governors to appoint House members immediately and sets special elections for those seats 90 days after that.

"In a time of national crisis, we need a bicameral legislature to handle an emergency, spend money and make appointments," Baird said.

His amendment got a boost from Norman Ornstein, an influential congressional scholar who wrote in Roll Call, a Capitol Hill publication, that Congress had to face the "nightmarish situation" directly.

"It is simply not practical to have the possibility exist of Congress being unable to operate because of massive deaths and incapacitations, or operating for many months with a skeleton crew," Ornstein wrote.

Baird, a clinical psychologist who has worked with terminally ill cancer patients, said it's important to "deal with death in a calm and measured way," but he understands that some of his colleagues don't want to dwell on it right now.

"The reaction has run the spectrum from those who say (my amendment) raises important issues that must be faced to those who prefer not to think about it," Baird said.

Several members said such an amendment would be writing the threat of mass terror into the Constitution, and end the tradition of voters always choosing House members.

"That's what's unique about the House - by history and tradition, we are elected," said Mark Foley, R-Fla. "I'd hate to see that end."

Robert Wexler, D-Fla., had a more visceral reaction to Baird's amendment: "God forbid! I hope it hasn't come to that yet."

Beyond the worst-case scenario, Congress is implementing and considering a host of security improvements. Dozens of new precast concrete barriers have been added to the Capitol grounds, and large trucks are now banned from nearby streets.

New mail-screening procedures should be in place soon. Crews are putting a shatterproof substance on the Capitol's windows.

"I feel comfortable with the system we will have in place for the mail, and there's a lot of new technology (for screening) we will be looking at," said Rep. Bob Ney, R-Ohio, chairman of the House Administration Committee.

Some House leaders are calling for an increase in the 1,250-member Capitol Police force, whose officers have been working 12-hour shifts six days a week since Sept. 11. National Guard troops also are being considered.

All members have been issued hand-held computers to keep in touch with leaders during emergencies. And evacuation procedures have been overhauled since the chaos of Sept. 11, when many members and staffers weren't sure where to go.

"The staff has had a chance to practice evacuations, and they now have two rendezvous places to go to," said Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla.

Congress and the Capitol have faced many threats in the building's 201-year history. Fourteen years after it was occupied, the Capitol was burned by British troops in 1814 while Congress was not in session. Members met in nearby buildings for five years while the Capitol was reconstructed.

During the Civil War, the Rotunda was used as a barracks for Union soldiers. Congress continued to meet under the threat of Confederate invasion. Business also continued uninterrupted during both world wars.

Puerto Rican nationalists opened fire in the House chamber in 1954, wounding five members. The House met the next day.

Small bombs were set off in 1971 and 1983, and a mentally disturbed man shot and killed two Capitol Police officers in 1998.

