

HOUSE PONDERES ISSUES OF GOVERNANCE AFTER CATASTROPHE

By Juliet Eilperin

The Washington Post

March 8, 2002

The administration's decision to rotate senior civilian managers through secret East Coast locations has ignited a debate within Congress over whether lawmakers are adequately prepared for a massive attack on Washington.

While House leaders intensified emergency evacuation plans after last fall's terrorist strikes and anthrax mailings, some lawmakers say these precautions do not address the broader issue of how the government -- including the legislative branch -- would function after widespread destruction in the nation's capital. A few members have introduced legislation, hoping to enact changes before another strike occurs.

"There is substantial ambiguity and uncertainty under the present circumstances about how Congress would continue to function in the event of a catastrophic attack," said Rep. Brian Baird (D-Wash.). "Why is it that the executive branch understands the importance of the continuity of government, but the leadership of the House and Senate does not?"

With the blessing of House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.), Baird wants to create a House-Senate task force to study both the rules of presidential succession and how to replace large numbers of lawmakers in the event of a calamity.

"I don't think we've done enough here on our continuity of government plan," Gephardt told reporters yesterday.

Some lawmakers have started preparing for a doomsday scenario. Baird has proposed a constitutional amendment that would allow governors to replace House members temporarily if more than one-fourth of them were "killed, disabled, missing and presumed dead." Rep. Brad Sherman (D-Calif.) introduced legislation last week that would revamp the rules for presidential succession.

Rep. Steve Chabot (R-Ohio), who chaired a recent subcommittee hearing on Baird's bill, called it "a serious proposal." But he said the move to appoint House members, instead of electing them, would be a radical departure from precedent.

"We should be very careful and very deliberate before we consider something as significant as changing the Constitution," Chabot said.

Sherman's measure, by contrast, would address which congressional leaders would succeed the president should the vice president be killed as well. Under current law, the House speaker is next in line, followed by the Senate president pro tempore.

Sherman notes that someone not from the president's party could end up running the government. His bill would avert this by requiring the president to designate either the House speaker or minority leader as next in line after the vice president. The president also would designate either the Senate majority leader or minority leader as fourth in line. These changes would not require a constitutional amendment because the line of succession after the vice president is set by law, which has changed over the decades.

Congressional leaders hesitate to address these questions, Sherman said, because it means contemplating a gruesome scenario. "This is a ghoulish topic," he said. "When you make a list of potential victims, our names are on the list."

House leaders have focused on immediate contingency planning rather than on the broader succession issues. House leaders have not sent aides into secure locations outside the city, as the administration has done with executive branch officials. But they have identified alternative sites to reconvene if the Capitol is damaged.

Congress had planned to use a secret bunker at West Virginia's Greenbrier resort until it became publicly known in 1992. Now House leaders have selected Fort McNair in Southwest D.C., as well as a few other locations farther away, according to aides.

Senate leaders, who are making separate plans, have not indicated publicly where they would relocate.

"There are options in place about where people would go and how they would get there," said Ranit Schmelzer, spokeswoman for Senate Majority Leader Thomas A. Daschle (D-S.D.).

A House leadership aide noted that the two chambers would have to choose a common relocation site if a broader attack forced lawmakers to vacate Washington. "You wouldn't want to have the Senate in South Dakota and the House in Illinois," the aide said.