

DOOMSDAY ACTION

Roll Call

May 16, 2002

On two levels, there's action at last on the preparations for a doomsday scenario. As Roll Call reports today, both the Senate and the House are seriously scouting out alternative locations where the chambers could meet in the event of a terrorist attack. And the House is holding its first meeting today on how to proceed if significant numbers of Members are killed or disabled.

Senate Sergeant-at-Arms Alfonso Lenhardt obviously would not disclose what sites are being considered as the chamber's relocation site, but he told Roll Call's Mark Preston that the Senate is looking at potential sites as far as 1,000 miles away from Washington, D.C. Lenhardt did not specifically rule out sites closer to the nation's capital, but said officials "are actively seeking to identify a place where we could go that could accommodate us depending upon the threat."

Lenhardt said he and Secretary of the Senate Jeri Thomson also are planning a simulation exercise this summer to see how to move Senate operations out of the Capitol in the event of an attack. He said that although the Senate and House are working on separate continuity-of-operations plans, the two chambers are also coordinating their activities and working to ensure that the executive, legislative and judicial branches can maintain communications.

As we've noted before - disapprovingly - House leaders have demonstrated a less-than-urgent approach to the constitutional and legal implications of a terrorist attack on the nation's capital. State governors are empowered to fill Senate vacancies temporarily, but the Constitution permits filling House vacancies only by special elections - a process that could take months at the peak of a national crisis.

But House Republican Policy Chairman Christopher Cox (Calif.) and Democratic Caucus Chairman Martin Frost (Texas) are convening a meeting of chairmen and ranking members of relevant House committees to hear from advocates of different plans to deal with the continuity problem. These include former Speaker Tom Foley (D-Wash.), Reps. Brian Baird (D-Wash.) and Vic Snyder (D-Ark.), and scholar and Roll Call contributor Norman Ornstein. Ornstein and Baird favor a constitutional amendment permitting governors to appoint new Members from a list that elected Members designate. Foley, as an interim measure, advocates a House rules change allowing Members to designate their successors. Snyder favors a process of expedited special elections.

The Cox-Frost meeting is a breakthrough, but we still aren't convinced that Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) takes the succession problem as seriously as he does the relocation issue. Hastert ordered an appropriation of \$100 million to get an alternate site prepared. He ought to impose a deadline for determining how to fill it in case of the unthinkable.