

## **SPEAKER: CONGRESS NOT READY FOR DISASTER**

By Austin Graham

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Congress should pass a constitutional amendment allowing for rapid replacement of members of the House of Representatives in the event of a terrorist attack on our nation's capitol, a Charlottesville audience was told Monday.

Pundit and newspaper columnist Norman J. Ornstein made that and other assertions Monday in a speech titled "What If Washington Is Hit?" at the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs.

Ornstein said he first began considering the issue after learning that the hijacked airliner that crashed in a Pennsylvania field Sept. 11 was headed to Washington — more specifically, Ornstein believes, to the Capitol Building.

Had the plane departed the airport on time and successfully reached its destination, Ornstein said, the subsequent damage to American government could have been catastrophic: Two thirds of the House membership was doing business in its chamber that morning.

The situation would have become even worse, he continued, as lawmakers tried to figure out how to reconvene the House membership. Unlike senators, replacement representatives cannot be appointed, and Ornstein said it is unclear how rules of quorum would change if members of Congress were killed or incapacitated en masse.

"Just imagine it, at just the time the nation was facing a crisis as severe as any we've had," Ornstein said. Instead of authorizing the use of military force, appropriating financial aid to New York and Washington and singing "God Bless America" on the steps of the Capitol Building, Ornstein said, "there'd have been no

Congress at all in this period."

The solution Ornstein suggested was a constitutional amendment allowing all members of the House to choose between three and six people who could serve in their stead in the event of a catastrophe. The amendment would only be invoked, he said, if a majority of state congressional delegations lost a majority of their members.

Ornstein also called on Congress to re-examine rules of succession involving the executive and judicial branches of government, singling out the "quaint" Presidential Succession Act as "one of the most poorly drafted" constitutional laws in existence.

If present leaders fail to overhaul the government's emergency plans to reflect the new danger of terrorist attacks, Ornstein said, "we will be charged by future generations with utter irresponsibility." He said he hopes to convince legislators to seriously consider the issue, but added that many are reticent to discuss or even think about it.

"It's been difficult to do for the same reason it's difficult to get people to write wills," Ornstein said.