Congressman Wolf's House Speech in September 1998 on taking action against terrorism

Congressional Record

House Floor Proceedings

September 9, 1998

Mr. Speaker, today, I am introducing legislation which will establish a national commission on terrorism . This will be a bipartisan, national panel of experts with diverse skills and outlooks—highly respected people from across the political spectrum. The commission would be accountable to the President, to Congress, and to the American people.

The purpose of the commission would be to take a close look at the problem of terrorism, including Middle Eastern-related terrorism, to study its origins and develop effective counter—measures and make recommendations to reshape our traditional policy on combating terrorism.

The proposed bipartisan national commission will consist of 15 distinguished members, five each appointed by the President, the Speaker of the House and the Majority Leader of the Senate in consultation with the Minority Leaders of the House and Senate. The commissioners will include three Members of Congress and three Senators. The commission will have a duration of six months and will be given every means to deal quickly with this national problem, including access to classified information, travel funds to engage in on-the-spot investigations, and accompanying congressional hearings.

A few weeks ago, 224 people lost their lives and more than 5,000 people were injured in the bombings of two U.S. embassies in East Africa. Twelve of those who died were Americans.

On August 20, President Clinton announced that the U.S. had determined a multimillionaire militant and terrorist kingpin, Osama bin Laden, was responsible for the attack. American forces bombed secret compounds and facilities linked to bin Laden in Afghanistan and Sudan that same day. While this response was proper and necessary, I believe we need to take another look at our nation's overall policy on terrorism. Bin Laden is certainly not our only worry. Unfortunately, there are other groups also known to be active in the area of terrorism.

As the world's leader, America and its people are natural terrorist targets. Our military, industrial and commercial presence around the globe attracts frustration from many terrorist groups.

But the problem is not limited to America alone. In Israel, Algeria, Egypt, and many other countries, terrorism has become an awful fact of life. A recent study in the Journal of Counterterrorism and Security International of all fatalities in international terrorist incidents from 1993 to 1996 showed that three-quarters of the deaths from those attacks could be laid at the feet of the militant, fundamentalist groups.

In my travels to many of these countries, I have seen firsthand the destruction that terrorism has inflicted on many innocent people. I have visited Sudan on three different occasions, and have seen the great instability that terrorist elements bring to a country when they are allowed to flourish. Over the July 1998 congressional recess, I visited Algeria, where 70,000 people have been killed by terrorists. I saw the fear and the sorrow that grips the people there as they have lost countless friends and loved ones in the violence in that nation. When I visited Lebanon after the horrible bombing in Beirut in 1983, I saw the Marine barracks that had been destroyed. On October 23, 1983, massive vehicle bombs devastated the headquarters of the U.S. Marine contingent, killing 241 U.S. Marines.

After my recent trip to Algeria and with this latest attack on the embassies in East Africa, I am convinced that it is time to reevaluate American counterterrorist strategy. I say this not to be critical of what has already been done or of current efforts. Much is being accomplished by the intelligence community in this regard. They are doing a great job and are to be complimented. Still, terrorism is growing.

Until now, we have been fortunate not to experience the full brunt of many terrorist attacks on our home soil. According to a recent article in the Economist, investigators of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing concluded that those plotting the incident intended to cause one tower to topple onto the other and to kill up to 250,000 people. Fortunately, the attack was not as successful as planned.

Some regions of the world are much more dangerous than others. Since 1983, more Americans have been killed by attacks perpetrated by terrorists either based in or connected to the Middle East than any other region of the world. In fact, the largest number of American lives lost to politically motivated violence since the end of the Vietnam War has been connected to Middle Eastern terrorism.

A number of incidents have not yet been fully resolved. In some cases, the perpetrators remain unknown. In other cases, the perpetrators are known but have not yet been held accountable for their actions, or have taken refuge in other countries.

Outstanding incidents are many. One of the most deadly years for terrorist violence was 1983, with the bombings of the Beirut embassy in April and the Marine barracks in October. Five years later, Pan Am Flight 103 was destroyed in flight over Scotland by a bomb, killing 259 persons on board, including 189 Americans, and 11 others on the ground. Experts say that although the culprits have been pinpointed, they are currently hiding in Libya and that nation is refusing to hand them over to authorities.

More recently came the car bomb explosion in the parking lot of the Office of Program Manager/Saudi Arabian National Guard in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in November 1995, which killed seven people and wounded 42 others. Seven months later in that country, a fuel truck carrying a bomb exploded outside the U.S. military's Khobar Towers housing facility in Dharan, killing 19 U.S. military personnel and wounding 515 persons, including 240 U.S. personnel.

Unidentified gunmen shot to death four U.S. auditors from Union Texas Petroleum and their Pakistani driver in Karachi, Pakistan, in November 1997. Now we are facing the latest terrorist incident of the bombing of two American embassies in East Africa. But over these last 15 years, there have been many other terrorist attacks and American blood has been shed both at home and abroad.

U.S. government agencies and private organizations have done valuable work to unearth the perpetrators of these crimes. Unfortunately, the potential for both an increased number of terrorist acts and for acts that can result in massive numbers of casualties is great and is growing.

America, and the world, must be prepared for new and more deadly kinds of terrorism --nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons of mass destruction. The danger is growing as weapons of mass destruction become more accessible.

The world watched in horror in March 1995, when the news came that members of a small religious sect had set off a nerve gas called sarin in the Tokyo subway. The incident killed 12 people and injured several thousand, but it was actually, like the World Trade Center, a botched job. When they investigated later, police found enough sarin in the sect's possession to kill millions of people.

It is imperative that the United States assess the most effective ways of combating terrorism and that policy makers have the full spectrum of options at their disposal. This is what the National Commission on Terrorism will do. And it must do so quickly. The American people deserve to be fully informed on this issue in the face of a powerful and vicious adversary.