

Congressional Reform
July 11, 2005

Moderator Slade Gorton
Opening Remarks

Good morning. On behalf of the Board Members of the 9/11 Public Discourse Project—my friends and colleagues, the former 9/11 Commissioners—I'd like to welcome all of you here today.

Once again, we would also like to thank the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars for hosting today's discussion.

This is the fifth in our series of panels reviewing the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission and what progress has been made since we issued our Report. What we learn in these sessions will help inform our report card on the progress of reform later this year.

This morning we will examine the question of Congressional reform.

Last year, the Commission wrote:

Of all our recommendations, strengthening congressional oversight may be among the most difficult and important. So long as oversight is governed by current Congressional rules and resolutions, we believe the American people will not get the security they want and need.

Congress responded enthusiastically and proactively to our recommendations to reform the Intelligence Community and the Executive Branch.

Members were less enthusiastic about our recommendations that Congress change dramatically its oversight activities.

None of us are under any illusions about the nature of the task before us. Few things are more difficult to change in Washington than congressional committee jurisdiction and prerogatives.

At the same time, we believe deeply that these Congressional reforms will improve the performance of the intelligence and homeland security agencies of our government. Without a doubt, these changes will improve the safety of the American people.

We continue to believe that the Congress needs to strengthen oversight. In particular, we believe the Congress needs to empower the Intelligence and Homeland Security committees with the authorities they need to conduct robust oversight of the Executive branch.

These Committees have the knowledge and expertise on national security issues. Their Members and staff spend countless hours analyzing the work of our intelligence agencies, and the Department of Homeland Security. They know where many of the problems are. What they need is enough carrots and sticks to compel change where it is needed. A great deal remains to be done.

Oversight is especially important for matters of national security. By its very nature, much of the work of counterterrorism must occur behind closed doors, away from the scrutiny of the media, watchdog groups, and the general public.

The people must rely on their elected Representatives in the Congress to ensure that the agencies responsible for their safety are getting the job done.