

Minnesota senator closes Washington office, citing terrorist threat

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Senator Mark Dayton, a Democrat from Minnesota, announced October 13 that he was closing his Washington DC office and sending his office staff to locations away from Capitol Hill or back to Minnesota until after the November 2 general election, as a precaution against the threat of a terrorist attack on the US capital.

The Senate is in recess until after the election, in which one third of Senate seats are at stake, in addition to the White House and all seats in the House of Representatives. Dayton is not up for reelection until 2006, and his staff would normally keep regular business hours on Capitol Hill during the pre-election recess. But Dayton decided otherwise after a series of intelligence briefings about potential terrorist attacks on Washington.

At a press conference, he declared, “I take this step out of extreme, but necessary, precaution to protect the lives and safety of my Senate staff and my Minnesota constituents, who might otherwise visit my office in the next few weeks. I feel compelled to do so, because I will not be here in Washington to share in what I consider to be an unacceptably greater risk to their safety.”

The first-term senator was either denounced or ridiculed by Senate colleagues, local officials in Washington, and the media. He is the only senator to close his office in the Russell Senate Office Building, which is situated across the street from the Capitol. Republicans have denounced him as a “coward,” as “paranoid,” and for “caving in to terrorism” and “sending the wrong message.”

Democrats sounded off as well—particularly local officials in Washington, worried about the impact on tourism. Washington Mayor Anthony Williams, said, “I’m literally scratching my head trying to figure out what frequency he’s on.” Eleanor Holmes Norton, the congressional delegate from Washington, DC and a member of the House Select Committee on Homeland Security, declared, “He’s damaged us. He’s unnecessarily panicked people across the United States.”

The *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, a staunchly pro-Democratic paper, editorialized, “We join the Capitol Hill security chief, the Homeland Security leadership, the mayor of Washington and, apparently, every other member of Congress in scratching our heads at Mark Dayton’s preemptive shuttering of his Senate office. It doesn’t take perfect foresight to imagine what the principal judgment will be: In staking out this Cassandra’s position, Dayton has added considerably to unfortunate aspects of his reputation: loner, loose cannon, flake. It’s simply impossible to take Dayton’s alarm seriously in the absence of any other

lawmaker or security official, so far, coming to a similar conclusion. Take it as political theater, it is farcical—and counterproductive.”

Dayton is hardly an eccentric or iconoclast, however. He is a multimillionaire scion of the family that founded Target Corporation, the second largest US retailer, and is in a position to receive information from high-level contacts within the US government and the corporate world about any possible “October surprise” attack on the US capital.

Despite the media onslaught, Dayton defended his position the following day, and added, “I would not advise someone to visit Capitol Hill between now and the election, out of extreme precaution. I would not bring my two sons to Capitol Hill between now and the election.”

According to Dayton’s account, the initial impulse for his decision came at a September 22 briefing on security in Iraq attended by 40 senators, as well as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other Pentagon officials. During the briefing, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist referred to an updated domestic threat assessment. When Dayton read the report the following day, he became alarmed at its “tone” and met with the Senate sergeant-at-arms to discuss it. He followed up by lobbying Senate leaders and spoke to Frist on three separate occasions, imploring him to call a special meeting of all 100 senators. Frist refused.

Frist’s office initially claimed the report Dayton cited had been issued in August and the Capitol’s security perimeter had been expanded as a result. Dayton’s office countered saying the report was dated September 15. Because the report is classified top secret, Dayton says he cannot divulge specifics. One Senate staffer told the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* that while no attacks on Capitol Hill were mentioned, the report did contain information concerning possible terrorist surveillance of the area.

The September 15 report was drawn up by a joint CIA-FBI agency called the Terrorist Threat Integration Center. The *Washington Post* said it described a worst-case scenario whereby Al Qaeda would use “weapons of mass destruction to launch multiple simultaneous attacks on the United States and overwhelm the US government.” The *Post*’s unnamed source said, “This scenario was way over the top,” and described it as “fire and brimstone raining down from the skies” and “the continental US up in smoke.”

On the weekend prior to Dayton’s October 13 press conference, a new update was issued that supposedly reduced the threat

outlined in the September 15 report. Dayton claims, however, that while less emphatic, the new analysis did not retract claims made in the original report.

Back in Minnesota on October 15, Dayton appeared on Minnesota Public Radio's Midday program. Despite constant probes by the host and callers about his action, Dayton stubbornly defended the decision.

In attempting to defend himself against charges of cowardice when compared to his Senate counterparts who did not close their offices, Dayton made a telling observation. Despite the fact the Senate has a large volume of unfinished business—eight major appropriation bills remain uncompleted—this year is the “earliest we have closed the Senate in the four years since I’ve been a senator. Two years ago [during the 2002 election], we stayed until the 17th of October.”

The implication is that, far from upholding their motto of “not caving in to terrorists,” senators were clearing out of Washington under the cover of a pre-election recess, while leaving their staffs behind to face an ostensible terrorist threat.

Several other Democratic senators indicated that they had received the same high-level briefing about terrorist threats and found it equally disturbing, although they did not take the same action in regard to their Washington offices. Indiana Senator Evan Bayh called the briefing “hair-curling,” but said he disagreed with the conclusion Dayton drew from it.

Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, the senior member of the Senate and an outspoken opponent of the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq, defended Dayton's action. “Senator Dayton took this precautionary step based on his conscience and his responsibility to his staff,” Byrd said. “I commend him.”

He added that intelligence and police officials had given repeated warnings about threats to Capitol Hill. “They have urged senators to be prepared to have their staffs work from alternate locations,” Byrd said. “Senators ought not take these warnings lightly. And those senators who put in place prudent security measures should not be mocked.”

There is more at issue, however, than attempts to ridicule Dayton for partisan purposes. The danger of a terrorist attack on the US Capitol cannot be separated from the political crisis of the Bush administration and growing concern in the White House and Republican Party that Bush could face defeat on November 2. Dragged down by the war in Iraq and the stagnating US economy, the Bush administration has only one card left to play—the “war on terror.”

It is not just a matter of ritualistically invoking the specter of September 11, as Bush and Cheney do in almost every campaign appearance. There is a growing danger that elements in the administration and the intelligence and national security apparatus will permit or directly engineer some new terrorist atrocity to try to stampede public opinion on the eve of the election, or even create the conditions where the election could be postponed or canceled.

Already during the summer, the head of the federal agency charged with assisting state election preparations sent a letter to Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge urging that the administration investigate its legal options for postponing or canceling the elections in the event of a major terrorist attack. The

leaking of the letter touched off a public outcry, and the White House publicly repudiated the suggestion. But there is little doubt that contingency plans have been made for such an eventuality.

There are two additional reasons to take Dayton's concerns seriously. Senate Democrats have already been targeted for one terrorist attack—the anthrax mailings in October 2001, sent to the offices of Tom Daschle, the Democratic leader, and Patrick Leahy, then chairman of the Judiciary Committee.

Despite the Bush administration's endless invocation of the “war on terror,” no arrests have been made and there has been little or no progress in investigating the anthrax attacks, in which five people died. What information has leaked out suggests that the perpetrators were right-wing individuals of US origin and that the spores involved in the attack were biologically identical to those manufactured at an army biological and chemical warfare unit in Utah.

Then there is the mysterious plane crash which killed Dayton's Minnesota Senate colleague, Paul Wellstone. The liberal Democrat was in a tight race in October 2002 elections against Bush-designated Republican challenger Norm Coleman, but was pulling ahead in the polls by coming out against military intervention in Iraq. Next Monday a group that has privately investigated the crash will hold a press conference in Washington to voice its conviction that Wellstone's death was a political assassination.

It would be foolish to believe that the Bush administration and the US government are incapable of such an action. On the contrary, Dayton's action in closing his Senate office suggests that concern over potential political gangsterism by the Bush administration is mounting even at the highest levels of the US political establishment.

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