

Among the issues that took center stage this week was the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) extension. FISA is a bill that allows our intelligence agencies to eavesdrop on terrorists operating here in the states and abroad. It provides them with the necessary tools and flexibility to respond to our enemies rapidly and to prevent future acts of terror against innocent Americans.

In its current state though, FISA is outdated and does not adequately reflect the nature of the new global war on terror. The Senate passed a fair and bipartisan compromise FISA bill by an overwhelming 68-29 vote earlier this week. The Senate bill is a 6-year extension that meets the needs of our intelligence agencies and closes a dangerous loophole in our outdated intelligence laws.

We know that terrorist cells are planning, plotting and operating within the United States. Our intelligence agencies need to be able to listen in on their communications, observe their movements and monitor their transmissions without hindrance. And those private firms that assist our federal government in preventing future acts of terrorism from being carried out against their fellow citizens should be able to do so free from the threat of prosecution or litigation.

We have hit a stopping point in the House but I am confident that in the end, for the good of the America public, republicans and democrats will come together and unite behind the common goal of protecting each and every American life.

I also had the opportunity to participate in a hearing held by the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, of which I am member, with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. She joined us on the Hill this past Wednesday to discuss the President's International Affairs Budget priorities and requests for the next year. She outlined how and where the President and the State Department feel our international dollars should be spent. It was nice to hear from Secretary Rice directly on the administration's foreign policy prerogatives and I applaud her for taking the time to meet with members of the committee on such an important topic.

During her testimony I was given the chance to ask her about her thoughts on Iran. I believe, as many others do as well, that Iran, despite their statements to the contrary, still have a desire to build nuclear weapons and use them as a means to further extend their reach in the Middle East. Iran continues to defy two U.N. Security Council Sanctions and is potentially only a few short years away from possessing nuclear weapons. In that context I asked Secretary Rice about the status of the next U.N. resolution on Iran, what would be included in the resolution and what our expectations are of our allies once the resolution has been passed? She answered that the most recent reports on Iran's nuclear program were positive but that our government and our allies still had doubts. She said that it was crucial that we as a world community continue to press Iran to maintain a peaceful nuclear capability and to further pursue diplomatic solutions to this difficult situation. I appreciated her frankness with myself and the committee.

I would also like to quickly take a moment to mention the passing of a colleague. Congressman Tom Lantos of California, the only Holocaust survivor to serve in the United States House of Representatives passed away this week. He was the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee and someone I had been privileged to befriend over the last few months. While he was democrat and we didn't necessarily agree on everything, we both shared a common desire to get things done for our constituents, work to advance human rights and to do what was best for our fellow citizens. Tom was a true statesman, a fact made clear at his memorial service on Thursday, which was attended by our Secretary of State Rice, the Israeli Foreign Minister, every member of the House and even Bono from the rock group U2.