

LARSON: RHETORIC MUST MEET REALITY ON PROTECTING AMERICA

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – As Congress prepares to consider the reauthorization of the PATRIOT Act, U.S. Congressman John B. Larson expressed concern Wednesday that the Republican leadership's focus on the PATRIOT Act ignores larger security gaps still facing the country.

"There is more to protecting American's security than peeking into people's reading habits or medical records," said Larson. "Expanding police powers alone won't make America invulnerable. We cannot allow law enforcement to assume such unlimited powers that the authorities become a risk to our citizenry. Protecting America means securing our ports and borders, supporting our first responders, and ensuring that our transit systems, nuclear power plants and schools are safe from those who seek to do us harm. Frankly, Americans are still at risk. As Congress prepares this week to make the PATRIOT Act a top priority, it does so at the peril of leaving unaddressed porous borders, dirty bomb scenarios, and unchecked cargo."

Larson expressed concern about the large gaps that still remain in critical areas that leave Americans vulnerable to the threat of terrorism. For example:

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Our greatest threat remains an attack by a weapon of mass destruction. But funding for cooperative threat reduction programs to secure unaccounted for nuclear material in the former Soviet Union have remained stagnant since 9/11, taking a backseat to other priorities like expanding tax cuts and privatizing Social Security.

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There are almost 2,000 fewer border inspectors and agents than were called for in the 2001 PATRIOT Act. The hard truth is we need more. Of the 2,000 border patrol agents called for in the Intelligence Reform Act, the Republican majority has funded only 500 this year. This leaves our borders dangerously unprotected.

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Funding for first responder programs, our front line defense against terrorists at home, has dropped 27 percent in the past three years, from a high of \$3.3 billion in 2003 to \$2.4 billion in 2006 -- funds which help our towns and cities hire, train and equip our police, firefighters and medical responders.

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While 32 million Americans use public transportation every day, we have spent only \$250 million on transit since 9/11, compared to the \$18.2 billion we've spent on aviation. This leaves our buses, trains, subways, highways and bridges dangerously vulnerable to the kind of attacks we saw in London.

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Almost four years after 9/11, only five percent of incoming cargo containers are inspected for hazardous materials. Ninety-five percent of American trade comes through our 361 seaports every year, yet there is no dedicated funding steam for port security. Despite the threat, the President requested no money for port security in FY 2006.

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Every day, Americans are asked to empty their pockets, remove their shoes and have their baggage inspected before boarding an airplane. However, most of the cargo loaded onto passenger and cargo airplanes still goes un-inspected. "Protecting America is not a partisan issue, it is a matter of priorities. This version of the PATRIOT Act may be slightly improved over the last one, but let's not take our eye off the ball. There is still much more to be done to protect America. Either we take real action to close our security gaps, or the terrorists will find them and exploit them. "Terrorism is a serious issue and the government must do all that it can to protect the American people from another terrorist attack. However, I believe we can effectively fight this threat while balancing our national security needs with the constitutional rights upon which this nation was founded, and in a manner that serves as a model for the rest of the world. "In the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks, the Administration pushed Congress for the quick passage of legislation to give our law enforcement the tools they needed to fight terrorism. With reservations, I joined many in the

House to pass the PATRIOT Act confident that the sunset of many of the more controversial provisions would allow Congress to fully reevaluate these new powers free from the fear and chaos of those dark days. I worry, however, that this has not been the case and my hope is that an open amendment process will allow concerns with the PATRIOT Act to be fully addressed.”

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