

legitimate national security threats, such as protecting the sources and methods of gathering extremely sensitive information. The current level of abuse of our classification system is so egregious as to be laughable.

To make matters worse, when the Congress has sought to declassify important information, we have allowed the fox to guard the henhouse—we have allowed the CIA and other agencies to determine what gets released to the American public from reports that are critical of their conduct.

I am personally most familiar with the report of the House and Senate Intelligence Committees' Joint Inquiry into the intelligence failures surrounding 9/11. After our report was filed in December 2002, it took 7 months to get a declassified version that we could release. And after all those months, the intelligence agencies and the White House refused to declassify pages and pages of information that might have caused them embarrassment—but certainly did not threaten our national security.

The most famous instance of censorship is the 27 pages that detail foreign sources of support of two of the 19 hijackers while they were living among us and finalizing their evil plot. For all we know, that pattern of support continues to this day. But our report found a number of instances where failures to share information were in and of themselves threats to national security.

Had Federal agencies' watch lists of terrorist suspects been shared, especially with State and local law enforcement officials, police might have detained prior to 9/11 several of the hijackers when they were stopped for traffic offenses. We also have learned that the President's Daily Brief of August 6, 2001, listed a number of pending threats to our homeland, including hijackings of commercial aircraft. If only that information had been shared with the airlines through the FAA, the airlines could have heightened security on board aircraft and more thoroughly screened their passenger lists. Instead, no steps were taken.

One of the Joint Inquiry's recommendations, No. 15, called on the President and the intelligence agencies to review executive orders, policies and procedures that govern national security classification of intelligence information:

in an effort to expand access to relevant information for Federal agencies outside the Intelligence Community, for State and local authorities, which are critical to the fight against terrorism, and for the American public.

The recommendation also called on Congress to review statutes, policies and procedures governing classification. As the recommendation states:

Among other matters, Congress should consider the degree to which excessive classification has been used in the past and the extent to which the emerging threat environment has greatly increased the need for real-time sharing of sensitive information.

The report called on the Director of Central Intelligence, the Attorney Gen-

eral, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of Homeland Security and the Secretary of State to review and report to the House and Senate committees with "proposals to protect against the use of the classification process as a shield to protect agency self-interest."

Regrettably, none of the executive branch agencies have responded to the Joint Inquiry's directives on this issue. So I am pleased to join my colleagues in cosponsoring this legislation, which will create an Independent National Security Classification Board within the executive branch to force the administration and the intelligence agencies to respond and to implement new procedures and standards. Once a new classification system has been adopted, the independent board will have access to all documents that are classified on the basis of national security concerns and the authority to review classification decisions made by executive branch employees. If the board disagrees with a decision, it can make a recommendation to the President to reverse or alter the classification.

If the President doesn't adopt the board's recommendation, he must within 60 days explain his decision to Congress:

and post such notification and written justification on the White House website.

This will, at the very least, let the American people know that they are being denied information.

#### COSPONSORSHIP OF S. 2623

Mr. FEINGOLD. Madam President, I discuss a very important issue to my home State of Wisconsin, and that is the time limits placed on Supplemental Security Income, SSI, benefits for refugees and other humanitarian immigrants.—

Due to a provision included in the 1996 welfare reform law, some refugees and other humanitarian immigrants legally residing in the United States, including many members of the Hmong ethnic group, are beginning to lose their eligibility for SSI. The provision states that refugees and other humanitarian immigrants are only eligible for SSI for 7 years. Some of these legal immigrants have already lost their benefits, and for others the 7-year deadline is quickly approaching.

Many of the Hmong who currently reside in Wisconsin and throughout the U.S. provided invaluable assistance to the U.S. military during the Vietnam War. The Hmong made great sacrifices in fighting against communists in Laos and providing intelligence to the CIA, and could no longer stay in the region out of fear for their safety. In return for their sacrifices for our Nation, we relocated them to the United States, along with their families, to live under refugee or humanitarian immigrant status.

The refugees and other humanitarian immigrants who depend on SSI are elderly or disabled and often lack any other financial resources. Many Hmong

currently have applications for citizenship pending, and have been waiting for over 2 years for their applications to be processed by the Immigration and Naturalization Service and now the Department of Homeland Security. Others are suffering from serious mental or physical disabilities that prevent them from completing the requirements necessary to obtain citizenship. Losing their SSI eligibility will cause significant strain to those Hmong who rely on SSI as their only financial means.

I am proud to cosponsor S. 2623, the SSI Extension for Elderly and Disabled Refugees Act, which was introduced by Senator SMITH. This bill would extend the 7-year deadline by 2 years, giving those refugees who depend on SSI some additional time to navigate the naturalization process.

It is my sincere hope that this bill will be taken up and passed quickly, since time is of the essence for this population. Many of the Hmong risked their lives to help the United States and I believe that the U.S. Government should do all it can to provide for them in their time of need.

#### AMERICAN HOSTAGES IN COLOMBIA

Mr. DODD. Madam President, last February, I rose before the Senate to draw attention to the fate of three Americans taken hostage by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—Marc Gonsalves, Keith Stansell, and Thomas Howes. It has been 5 months since then—17 months since Marc, Keith and Tom were captured. Since that tragic day, these Americans and their families have lived in fear, never knowing what tomorrow may bring. I say today what I said then—there must be no higher priority than ensuring that Marc, Keith and Tom return safely home. I commend the actions taken thus far by United States and Colombian officials to find these brave Americans, but I urge them to redouble their efforts.

Marc, Keith and Tom were taken captive when their plane crashed in FARC controlled territory on February 13, 2003. Two individuals, an American pilot, Tom Janis, and a Colombian intelligence officer, were killed by the FARC at the crash site, and Marc, Keith and Tom have remained in captivity since that time. A video documentary released last year containing interviews with the three men dramatically underscores the urgency of their dire situation.

I know that all of our prayers remain with these Americans and their families. As any parent knows, it is impossible to describe the pain these families suffer knowing that their sons are in danger, unable to communicate with them, and uncertain whether they will ever see them again. Marc Gonsalves' mother, Jo Rosano, is a Connecticut