

OBAMA VOWS TO REBUILD FBI RANKS - THE MOST SERIOUS THREAT TO COUNTRY IS TERRORISM, MCCAIN CAMP COUNTERS

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Barack Obama is calling for 1,000 new agents to restore crippled FBI crime squads, a move John McCain's campaign has criticized as political posturing.

The Bush administration - in reinventing the FBI after 9/11 - shifted about 2,400 agents from traditional crime-fighting squads to counterterrorism units.

At least 1,700 of those agents haven't been replaced, and the latest Bush budget continues that trend.

"The FBI plays a critical role in confronting many of the challenges we face," Obama told the Seattle P-I, "and I am committed to delivering the resources needed to investigate and identify those seeking to do harm - whether they are terrorists, gangs or white-collar criminals."

Obama said his position is a response to a serious crime problem overwhelming the FBI's weakened traditional law enforcement squads across the country.

"I reject the Bush administration's contention that in order to protect our nation from terrorists, we have to deplete the resources used by the FBI to protect our communities from criminals," Obama said. "Even as we fight terrorism, we cannot lose sight of high crime rates in our cities, violence in our schools and economic crimes like predatory mortgage lenders."

But McCain's campaign, through spokesman Rick Gorka, described Obama's proposal as "a typical Washington, D.C., political game."

"As president," Gorka said, "John McCain would ensure that the FBI receives the resources it needs to fulfill its role in confronting crime at home, while recognizing that there is no more important public safety mission than locating and disrupting terrorist organizations inside and outside the United States."

The McCain campaign, however, refused repeated requests to specify what the Arizona senator would do - if anything - to bolster FBI crime squads if he's elected.

The White House's deputy budget director told the P-I earlier this year that the administration doesn't view restoring the FBI criminal division to its previous staffing levels as a priority.

"The assumption that how it was pre-9/11 is how it ought to be for all time is not the correct premise," Steve McMillin said.

A P-I analysis found that from the terror attacks through 2005, the FBI has experienced a 34 percent drop in criminal investigations referred to federal prosecutors, a 65 percent plunge in civil rights investigations and a 30 percent decline in white-collar crime convictions.

The Democrat-controlled Congress - in a search for solutions - ordered the FBI to provide a report breaking down how its agents are being used.

That nationwide report, mandated in December as part of a 2008 budget compromise, was due by February. The FBI has completed it, but it's being withheld by the Justice Department.

A department spokesman refused to explain why it's being kept under wraps.

Obama's FBI-staffing proposal echoes that of Sen. Joe Biden, D-Del., who introduced a bill calling for 1,000 new agents last year before he dropped out of the race for president.

"Since President Bush took office, Senator McCain has either remained silent or voted against every major funding effort for law enforcement," said Biden, chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Crime and Drugs.

"The administration's shift of more than 1,000 FBI agents away from fighting traditional crime to fighting terror was necessary - but the failure to replace them, coupled with the \$2 billion-a-year cuts to local law enforcement, has created a perfect storm. We need to restore the money the Bush administration has cut," Biden said.

Biden's bill is languishing in committee and has found only one co-sponsor - Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash.

Murray - who holds the No. 4 Democratic leadership position in the Senate - said she is "extremely frustrated" that the FBI report still hasn't been released.

"The bureaucratic delays we've seen - first at the FBI and now at the DOJ - allow this problem to fester and make us all less secure," she said.

"But we must face facts. While it's past time for this report to be presented, it's also past time to continue waiting on an administration that's proven unwilling to budget for the country's true law enforcement needs," Murray said.

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