Hearings on Sept. 11 Lapse To Test Ties of the 2 Leaders


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If there is a significant difference of opinion among leaders of the inquiry, it may be between the two top Republicans, Mr. Goss and Mr. [Richard C. Shelby]. Mr. Shelby has suggested that Mr. Goss, a former C.I.A. officer, is too supportive of the intelligence agencies and their leadership.

Mr. Graham, the father of four, is a Harvard law school graduate who lives outside Miami. Mr. Goss, also the father of four, is a Yale alumnus who lives on the opposite coast in Sanibel. The Grahams raise angus on their farm in Georgia; Goss’s farm in Virginia specializes in Piedmontese cattle, a lesser-known breed raised for lean meat.

Both are Ivy League-educated millionaires from cities on the Florida coast. In Congress, they are viewed as lawmakers long on substance and short on flash. Each could easily read from the other’s notes on health care or the environment. As gentlemen farmers, they raise beef.

As lawmakers they would be practically interchangeable, except that one, Porter J. Goss, is a Republican member of the House and the other, Bob Graham, a Democratic senator. They will oversee joint Congressional hearings into the intelligence community’s failure to foresee the Sept. 11 attacks.

While House-Senate inquiries have the potential to become partisan sideshows, the intelligence sessions will be governed by close colleagues of long standing who share remarkably similar sensibilities and political styles even though they vote in different primaries.

In fact, Mr. Graham, the chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, gave Mr. Goss, the chairman of the House intelligence committee, an important early lift in his political career. In 1983, as the Democratic governor of Florida, Mr. Graham named Mr. Goss to a vacancy on a corruption-plagued county commission in Southwest Florida.

"There were some of my Democratic friends in Lee County who felt I should not be appointing Republicans to the county commission," recalled Mr. Graham, who says he is confident he did the proper thing.

Those involved with negotiating the agreement behind the announcement on Thursday that hearings on intelligence gathering would be convened this spring said the trust between Mr. Graham and Mr. Goss was crucial to reaching a deal on the ground rules for the sessions.

"The confidence that people have in one another is very important to a joint inquiry of this kind, that it is not going to be about politics, about party, that you are not going to be grandstanding one another," said Representative Nancy Pelosi of California, the senior Democrat on the House committee.

Mr. Goss said, "It just makes life a whole lot simpler here if you can cut through the excess work that goes into the partisanship and the posturing."

The two chairmen worked out the parameters of the inquiry along with Mrs. Pelosi and Senator Richard C. Shelby of Alabama, the Republican vice chairman of the Senate panel, and in meetings with Vice President Dick Cheney and other officials.

Some lawmakers had pushed for hearings into any intelligence lapses to be held last year. But the Bush administration sought to delay any investigation, saying it could prove distracting in the early weeks of the fight against terrorism. The intelligence panel leaders agreed and they have won a promise of White House cooperation in their hearings, which will examine not only Sept. 11 but the intelligence agencies responded to the rising threat of terrorism beginning in the 1980’s.

"We are not going to have a whitewash, we are not going to have a sham investigation," said Mr. Shelby, who has been an outspoken critic of the director of Central Intelligence, George J. Tenet. "I believe at this juncture we are off to a good start but we have a long road ahead of us."

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Mr. Goss, a former C.I.A. officer, is too supportive of the intelligence agencies and their leadership.

"I have always felt that we should not be too close to them," Mr. Shelby said. "We need to keep some distance between a healthy oversight and our relationship with the principals in the agencies."

Mr. Goss says his own intelligence experience gives him the ability to "know what questions to ask and discern what is real and what is not in the answers." He said he will not shy from issuing a tough report if justified by evidence. "If it turns out there are skeletons in the closet or gross negligence or brilliant courage, whatever it is we find on either side of the ledger, I will not hesitate to bring it forward," he said.

Mr. Goss, 64, and Mr. Graham, 66, were together on the morning of Sept. 11, meeting in Mr. Goss's Capitol conference room with the chief of the Pakistani intelligence service, whom they had met while traveling together to the region a few weeks earlier. An aide slipped them a note about the first strike on the World Trade Center, then a second note and the men soon joined the evacuation of the building.

The pair traveled extensively on intelligence missions over the previous months. Those trips strengthened a bond built over years of working on such Florida issues as preventing offshore oil drilling and restoration of the Everglades.

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"I kid Porter that he needs to get into some real beef," Mr. Graham said.

Their cross-party relationship is not unique in Congress, but neither is it common.

"We have always gotten along," Mr. Goss said. "Ideologically, there is not a lot of difference. But there is trust in the relationship. Bob Graham gives his word and that is all I need."

Senator Graham offered a similar take on his colleague, "He is solid to the core and there are not an excessive number of people in Congress about who I am able to say that."

[Photograph]
Porter J. Goss, left, a Republican, and Bob Graham, a Democrat, will lead House-Senate hearings. (Paul Hosefros/The New York Times)