Rep. William M. 'Mac' Thornberry

Republican of Texas

UNHERALDE

House History: Elected 1994; won fourth term in 2000 with 68 percent

13th District: Eastern Panhandle — Wichita Falls; part of Amarillo

Hometown: Clarendon
Born: July 15, 1958, Clarendon
Religion: Presbyterian
Family: Wife, Sally Thornberry; two children
Education: Texas Tech U., B.A. 1980; U. of Texas, J.D. 1983
Career: Lawyer; cattleman; State Department official; congressional aide
Political Highlights: No previous office

Committees: Armed Services; Budget; Resources

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When he introduced legislation last March that would empower a single federal agency to

prevent and respond to terrorist attacks, few in or out of the 107th Congress expected that one of William M. "Mac" Thornberry's ideas would be at the top of the congressional agenda half a year later.

Although the bill earned a hearing before the House Government Reform Committee, through the spring and summer it won a single cosponsor (Jim Ryun, R-Kan.). But within a few days of Sept. 11, a dozen other House members put their names on the measure, which would rename the Federal Emergency Management Agency as the National Homeland Security Agency and give its officials control over the Coast Guard (now in the Transportation Department), the Customs Service (part of the Treasury) and the Border Patrol (an arm of the Justice Department) and more.

His unheralded writing of that bill gave Thornberry an aura of prescience as soon as the World Trade Center's twin towers were felled and the Pentagon was torn open by hijacked airliners Sept. 11. His understanding of the government's disparate jurisdiction over domestic security, and his steadily growing influence on the Armed Services Committee, have made him one of the more influential junior House members of the War Congress. He says he has been consulted by top administration officials several times since the terrorist attacks, even though President Bush has taken a somewhat different approach than Thornberry in his creation of a new White House Office of Homeland Security. Thornberry is among those who are skeptical that the office's director, Tom Ridge, can be effective without having the budgeting and administrative powers of a Cabinet-level department head.

Thornberry's proposal was based on the recommendations of a bipartisan commission led by two former senators, Democrat Gary Hart of Colorado (1975-87) and Republican Warren B. Rudman of New Hampshire (1980-93), which warned that terrorist attacks on U.S. soil were a real possibility and recommended sweeping changes in government to cope with the threat.

Thornberry likens his work on the domestic defense issue to his little-noticed, four-year quest to reorganize the bureaucracy that provides security at nuclear weapons complexes. In part because the giant Pantex weapons assembly complex is in his district, in his first term in 1995 Thornberry began campaigning to place oversight of nuclear weapons complexes under a single, semi-autonomous federal agency. But the idea was essentially ignored until the reports detailing China's alleged attempts to steal highly classified information from Energy Department nuclear weapons laboratories. His proposal for creating the National Nuclear Security Administration was enacted in 1999, and in the 107th Congress Thornberry was named chairman of the Special Oversight Panel on Department of Energy Reorganization, established by the Armed Services Committee to help implement the new law.

Thornberry said that experience illustrated for him how it often requires a a crisis or some other great event to focus congressional attention on an issue.

Much of his approach to legislative strategy was formed during the first five years he spent working on Capitol Hill, first as a legislative aide to Tom Loeffler (1979-87) and then as chief of staff to Larry Combest. The paths to the House for both of those Texas Republicans had been smoothed by their own success as congressional aides — in both cases, for Sen. John Tower (1961-85), dean of the first generation of modern-day Texas Republicans. Like all three of his political forebears, Thornberry can temper his conservatism with a bit of pragmatism when the need arises. While many of his colleagues in the "revolutionary" GOP Class of 1994 balked at their leadership's compromises with President Bill Clinton and plotted to remove Newt Gingrich as Speaker because they found him too conciliatory, for example, Thornberry stayed apart from the coup.

As a staffer he became enough of a student of the institution of the House, and cultivated enough of an unflappable temperament, that he is now often tapped by GOP leaders to preside over the more contentious legislative debates. An effective lawmaker, Thornberry says, must possess "energy, patience and persistence."

Thornberry traces his conservatism to his upbringing on the Texas cattle ranch that has been in the family for more than 70 years. He grew up in a modest house built by his grandfather in the 1930s. "I was taught at a very young age the importance of doing a good job and putting in an honest day's work," he told the Texas Tech University alumni magazine in 1997. "I also learned how much a person can accomplish if they're just left alone to do it. In many respects, these are two foreign concepts in Washington."

His time as a Hill aide led him to a job at the end of the Reagan administration as a deputy assistant secretary of State for legislative affairs. Back in Texas in 1989, he worked in an Amarillo law firm while helping run his family's cattle ranch. Waging his first campaign for public office in the Republican takeover year of 1994, Thornberry played up his family's close ties to the land — and the votes of his opponent, Democratic Rep. Bill Sarpalius (1989-95) for Clinton's tax-raising 1993 budget plan. Thornberry won with 55 percent of the vote, and has won two-thirds of the vote in each of his three re-election victories.

"Defense is the first priority of the federal government, and we need to take care of that before we address other issues," he says. While some lawmakers contemplated other uses for a projected federal budget surplus — which had essentially disappeared by year's end — Thornberry insisted that any "excess" money go to increase defense spending. He is a leading advocate for the construction of a U.S. anti-missile defense system and is an unabashed protector of Sheppard Air Force Base in his district. He also has an interest in V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft, which are assembled by his constituents at Bell Helicopter in Amarillo.

From his seat on the Resources Committee, Thornberry sides squarely with the concerns of ranchers. He is a staunch proponent of property owners' rights and believes that federal laws and regulations impinge unduly on farmers' land-use decisions. Accordingly, he regularly supports bills to overhaul the Endangered Species Act, which allows the government to block development on private lands. In the 106th Congress, he denounced the law as "an example of how the federal government has crossed the line between responsible conservation and overzealous regulation."

His constituents are among the nation's biggest producers of wheat and peanuts, and his House district grows more cotton than any other, so Thornberry has a keen interest in federal support for those crops. In his first term he voted to enact the "Freedom to Farm" law, which was written by GOP conservatives to replace New Deal-era crop subsidies with a system more in line with free-market principles. But he also bucked House leaders by working with Combest to preserve the federal support system for cotton. This fall, he also sided with Combest, who as Agriculture Committee chairman pushed the House to pass legislation that would maintain or expand subsidies for row crops and expand federal payments to ranchers as well.

Although he favors a leaner government, Thornberry is not averse to supporting funding that helps his district. Like his Democratic predecessor, Thornberry spoke up for the Amarillo-based Helium Reserve program, which employed about 200 people overseeing the federal government's stockpile of helium gas. In 1996, when the House considered a measure to end the program, Thornberry was a lonely voice arguing for privatizing it to help provide greater financial return for taxpayers and protect workers in Amarillo.

Like many of his Lone Star State colleagues, he is among the House members most likely to walk the halls in boots.

— *David Mark*

Word for Word

Thornberry, in a March 21 press release on the introduction of his bill (HR 1158) to establish a National Homeland Security Agency:

The purpose of today's bill is to help make us prepared by reorganizing the federal government in a way that makes us better able to prevent and respond to homeland attacks.

The bill is called the National Homeland Security Agency Act. Based on a recent recommendation by the bipartisan Commission on National Security/21st Century, the measure would bring together four federal agencies currently on the front lines of homeland defense — the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Coast Guard, the Customs Service and the Border Patrol. . . .

The intent of establishing a new Homeland Security Agency is not to add another layer of fat to our already bloated federal bureaucracy. Rather, the goal is to realign and consolidate a number of key federal agencies in a way that will help the federal government better prevent and respond to homeland threats. . . .

As it stands now, more than 40 federal agencies are responsible for homeland security. In the event of a terrorist attack, which agency would be in charge? The answer is, it depends. In some cases, it would be the FBI. In other cases, it would be FEMA. For state and local governments, this uncertainty could lead to confusion. That's the last thing you want. During times of crisis, the public needs a phone number, not a phone book, which is one thing this bill will help provide.

Beyond that, I think one of the most significant things about this proposal is that it elevates homeland security up the list of national priorities and gives the director of homeland security a seat at the Cabinet table. At the same time, it puts in place a homeland security structure that meets the needs of today and the future rather than yesterday and the past.