MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2005

A FIX FOR FIRST RESPONDERS

By John McCain, Joseph Lieberman, Jane Harman and Curt Weldon

It was four years ago this month that our brave police officers, firefighters and other emergency response personnel raced into the smoldering buildings of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon to try to save the lives of thousands. Unfortunately, their efforts were hindered by a communications system that failed to allow these first responders to communicate with each other, something known as "interoperability." In some cases, not only could the first responders who entered the twin towers not communicate with each other, they were also unable to reach their base commanders in the lobby or at headquarters because the radio communications could not travel great distances or penetrate the thick steel walls and concrete floors. The Sept. 11 commission found: "Command and control decisions were affected by the lack of knowledge of what was happening 30, 60, 90, and 100 floors above. According to one of the [fire] chiefs in the lobby, 'One of the most critical things in a major operation like this is to have information. We didn't have a lot of information coming in. We didn't receive any reports of what was seen from the . . . helicopters. It was impossible to know how much damage was done on the upper floors, whether the stairwells were intact or not.' . . . 'People watching on TV certainly had more knowledge of what was happening a hundred floors above us than we did in the lobby.' " In the past few weeks, we have seen an even more devastating breakdown in emergency communications, as phone lines, cell towers and electrical systems were wracked by Hurricane Katrina, making it nearly impossible at times for many first responders and government officials on the Gulf Coast to talk to each other. Many emergency officials had to resort to runners to communicate with first responders in the field. With all the technology innovations of recent years, how is it that first responders, those we depend on when disaster strikes, are still unable to adequately communicate with each other during an emergency, while we are able to watch the crisis unfold on our television sets? It's because public officials have yet to get serious about developing and funding a safety communications system for all local, state and federal first responders. This reality became all too clear during the bungled response to Katrina. The federal government needs to develop a comprehensive, interoperable emergency

communications plan and set equipment standards, fund the purchase of emergency and interoperable communications equipment, and provide additional radio spectrum that will allow first responders to communicate over long distances using the same radio frequencies and equipment. This is not to say that we haven't made some progress. The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act, passed last year, required that the federal government take initial steps on both interoperability and public safety spectrum. But we have much more to do. The Sept. 11 commission's final report urged Congress to provide more radio spectrum, equipment and funding to first responders for improved communications systems. Since then we have introduced legislation to do so. We believe strongly that such legislation is a life-or-death matter. But Congress has yet to act. We can only imagine how an improved communications system could have aided rescue workers in their efforts to respond to the needs of citizens after Hurricane Katrina. The federal government has sat by and allowed this problem to remain unresolved for four years following the devastation of Sept. 11, 2001, even as many predicted another disaster. After watching the horrific communications breakdown that occurred during Katrina, will we wait another four years before acting? How many more lives will be lost? What kind of catastrophic disaster is necessary for Congress to give these heroes the tools they need to save lives? We urge Congress to immediately take up pending legislation that would finally provide emergency first responders with the radio spectrum, equipment and funding necessary to protect themselves as they come to the aid of those they were sworn to protect. When lives are on the line, seconds count. And reliable emergency communications become a matter of life and death. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) are U.S. senators. Jane Harman (D-Calif.) and Curt Weldon (R-Pa.) are members of the House of Representatives.