



## Short List, Tall Order

[Edwin Feulner](#)

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Returning to work after a vacation is always difficult. There are phone calls to return, e-mails to answer and work piled high in the in-box.

That's what lawmakers face this week as they return to Washington. Most have spent part of their August recess hearing from constituents and are under pressure to "get things done" before Election Day.

But what matters isn't accomplishing some things, it's accomplishing the right things. As lawmakers organize their calendars for the next two months, here are three main issues they should put at the top of their to-do lists.

Job #1: National Security. Protecting us is the federal government's main job. Yet, five years after 9/11, we're not as safe as we ought to be. To help fix that, lawmakers should begin by making it clear that the National Security Agency has the legal

power to monitor phone calls, financial transactions and other communications involving suspected terrorists outside the country and persons in the U.S.

Many Americans assume NSA already has the power to do this, but a recent ruling by federal judge Anna Diggs Taylor has called such covert monitoring programs into question. As the recently exposed U.K. airliner plot makes clear, we must remain able to track communications by our enemies.

And while it's clearing up confusion sown by the judicial branch, Congress should pass a law stating that the executive branch may use military tribunals to prosecute suspected terrorists held at Guantanamo Bay. The Supreme Court's decision this year in the Hamdan case indicates that such tribunals would be legal only if Congress authorized them -- so it should do so

without delay.

The second issue lawmakers should work on is energy security.

Yes, gasoline prices are starting to come down. But lawmakers can help keep that positive trend going by easing restrictions that artificially dampen our domestic supply of oil.

For example, the U.S. Geological Survey estimates billions of barrels of oil lie in the North Cuban Basin, just a few dozen miles off the Florida coast. All told, the Interior Department reports, there are 19 billion barrels of oil in American waters. But because of a federal moratorium on off-shore drilling, American companies are prevented from recovering most of that oil.

Lawmakers should end that moratorium – and look north to Alaska, where they should green light drilling in a tiny portion of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Opening just 1.5 million of ANWR's 19 million acres to development could yield 10 billion barrels of oil -- enough to boost domestic production by 50 percent. Each day that Congress delays, we're importing more and more oil from the Middle East. It's time to change that.

Finally, lawmakers should resist the temptation to try to buy votes with last minute pork-barrel spending. Rather, they should show their commitment to fiscal responsibility by announcing a one-year ban on all such "earmarks."

Last year's spending shenanigans show why. As taxpayers struggled to keep up with rising energy prices, lawmakers were earmarking frivolous local projects – from \$500,000 for a community pool in California to hundreds of millions for a "bridge to nowhere" in Alaska.

In the last dozen years, Congressional earmarks inserted into appropriations bills have more than tripled -- from 4,155 in 1994 to 15,887 in 2005. That's a big reason federal spending has increased so markedly in recent years. A complete moratorium on earmarks would show voters that lawmakers are finally getting serious about controlling spending.

If lawmakers tackle these issues, they can ignore the rest of the inbox. And they can go home to campaign knowing they've taken critical steps to make the country safer and increase energy supplies -- while getting spending under control.

[Edwin Feulner](#) is president of [The Heritage Foundation](#).

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