

'We are still at war,' immigration chief says

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Speaking to Orlando law students on the anniversary of 9-11, U.S. immigration chief Emilio Gonzalez said the processing of immigrants is more thorough than it was when the foreign hijackers entered the country more than six years ago.

But he acknowledged that the process remains far from perfect.

The undersecretary, who heads U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, told the crowd of about 200 students and faculty at Barry University that his mission is "to balance national security and individual liberty" in reviewing immigrants' requests.

"Government's efforts have been very successful," Gonzalez said. "There is a reason we haven't been attacked."

The agency, he said, remains on the front line of changes sparked by the terrorist attacks. It was created to handle visa and citizenship petitions as a new arm of the Department of Homeland Security. A sister agency removes deported immigrants.

"In my parents' generation," Gonzalez said, "people asked, 'Where were you the day President Kennedy died?' . . . And in our generation it's: 'What were you doing on 9-11? Where were you?' "

In Gonzalez's case, he was aboard a 737 military aircraft coming to the U.S. from Colombia, where he had been working as special assistant to a U.S. general.

Although he wouldn't head the immigration agency until four years later, Gonzalez said he knew then that something fundamental had changed: "This is a war. This is really a war. This is not make-believe. And today, I posit to you that we are still at war."

Those who asked questions after Gonzalez's 45-minute speech, though, expressed more concern about immigrants' civil rights and the need for more visas than worries about the next terrorist slipping into the U.S. undetected.

Student Mark Clopson, for instance, asked Gonzalez how the public could trust the same bureaucracy that allowed hijackers to enter in the first place, and one that has been accused of trampling civil rights over the war.

Gonzalez criticized Congress' failure to pass immigration reform, taking away tools that he said would have balanced access and enforcement. By one estimate, there are more than 11 million illegal immigrants in the U.S.

"You have an illegal population in the United States that surpasses the population of Belgium," Gonzalez said. "We need to know who those people are. I'd like to get some biometrics to see if there are arrest warrants for those folks."

Salam Tekbali, a third-year law student from Tucson, Ariz., said that even after hearing Gonzalez's talk, he remained skeptical that the government will make progress in the war on terror.

"The government provides Band-Aid solutions, but it doesn't provide a cure," said Tekbali, 25. "Stopping immigrants is a Band-Aid, but that doesn't get rid of people hating us" and wanting to do harm.