

WebMemo



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Testing the House's Homeland Security Agenda

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Next week, the new congressional majority will introduce legislation to fulfill an election year pledge to further implement the reforms proposed by the 9/11 Commission. Prudent action by Congress that better prepares the nation to deal with the threat of transnational terrorism is certainly warranted, but determining whether this initiative achieves that end will not be easy. Moving quickly to mark up this legislation without hearings or floor debate will leave little time to consider the bill. There are, however, three tell-tale signs that will indicate whether the measure is thoughtfully constructed to help keep America secure, free, and prosperous.

Watch Out for Checkbook Security

Simply authorizing more homeland security spending will not make Americans safer. That is particularly true for measures intended to protect infrastructure like bridges, trains, and tunnels. Terrorists thrive on attacking vulnerabilities, looking for the weakest link. The United States is a nation of virtually infinite vulnerabilities, from high schools to shopping malls. Pouring billions of federal tax dollars into protecting any of them may please some constituents and vested interests, but it will not do much to stop terrorists who will just move on to another "soft" target. The far better investment of federal dollars is on counterterrorism programs that break up terror cells and thwart attacks before they occur.

Beware of Feel Good Security

Some proposals sound compelling, but on closer scrutiny make no sense. Inspecting every container shipped from overseas is a case in point. There is no evidence that this would be a more cost-effective means to deter threats than the current cargo screening system. On the contrary, screening everything would be extremely expensive, and the technology is not very effective. But even if the available screening technologies were cheap, fast, and accurate, they would produce so much data (from peeking into the tens of thousands of containers bound for U.S. ports every day) that the information could not be checked before the containers' contents arrived in stores. Tax dollars should not be spent on what makes for the best election-year bumper sticker, but on initiatives that offer the most security for the dollar spent.

Look Out for Checklist Security

Legislation that simply demands more reports, adds more mandates, and sets more unrealistic deadlines might check the box that Congress has considered every 9/11 Commission recommendation, but it would achieve little else. Any proposed

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new security measures should be backed up by credible analyses of how they would diminish the threat of transnational terrorism, the likely costs of implementing them, and their suitability and feasibility.

A Test for Leadership

The new congressional majority's forthcoming homeland security legislation will offer an early opportunity to measure the seriousness of the new leadership and the House's 100-Hour Agenda. A bill that simply throws money at the problem, imple-

ments symbolic programs that add little real security, and heaps more requirements to an already overloaded "to-do list" for the Department of Homeland Security will fail the leadership test.

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