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Six Years After 9/11: Are We Safe Yet?

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In the wake of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, Americans could bank on three sobering facts. Heritage scholars outlined them in the introduction to a recent book, *Winning the Long War: Lessons from the Cold War for Defeating Terrorism and Preserving Freedom*:

1. Dealing with the threat of transnational terrorism will take time and patience, both because of the nature of the enemy and the effort required to adapt to fighting the threat.
2. Washington's inertia could jeopardize homeland security. Once government begins to operate in a certain way, good and bad habits quickly become standard operating procedures that are difficult to change. Patience does not mean complacency, and policymakers must fix what is not working.
3. Policymakers must carefully consider a strategy before acting. Winning a long war requires a strategy to keep America safe, free, and prosperous—a “lifeline of a guiding idea” to focus effort, attention, and resources in pursuit of national objectives. Policymakers must figure out what needs to be done—and then stick to it.

Six years later, nothing has changed. As with every great national endeavor, America's record to the challenges of transnational terrorism is mixed. Generally, the nation has done well, but there are troubling signs that Congress is losing its focus.

Keeping Score. America is better prepared to deal with the threat of transnational terrorism than

it was before 9/11. The government has uncovered and thwarted at least 16 terrorist conspiracies in the United States and helped disrupt major plots aimed at America or U.S. persons in Canada, Britain, and, most recently, Germany.

Many of the most important tools for protecting homeland security were in place before 9/11: intelligence activities, information-sharing, counterterrorism, and law enforcement investigations and cooperation. However, the United States and its friends and allies now take these tasks much more seriously than they did before 9/11. Terrorists may be taking the offensive in other parts of the world—but there is no question that they find America and its allies are “harder” targets than they were in 2001.

Drifting Off Course. The greatest impediment to continued progress may be a Congress that appears anxious to “over help” on homeland security. Indeed, many of the troubles in setting up the Department of Homeland Security and organizing domestic programs can be traced to legislative meddling: impractical mandates, unrealistic timelines, and questionable objectives. The recent congressional requirements demanding 100 percent of screening of air and sea cargo offer a case in point.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/wm1609.cfm

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Congress imposed the “super” screening even though most credible security analysts question the practicality or utility of the measure.

Congress has also failed to consolidate its oversight responsibilities. Homeland Security officials report to a plethora of committees that offer conflicting and competing guidance. Committees continue to tinker with the department, moving offices and adding missions.

Congress still wastes money, insisting on priorities that do not meet national needs. For example, the 9/11 Commission argued that Homeland Security grants were in danger of becoming “pork-barrel” funding. Congress not only refused to fix the problem but also made it worse. Recent legislation requires doling out even more money to each state, regardless of risk or need.

On Reflection. Six years after 9/11, America is still safe, free, and prosperous. If the nation is going

to stay the course in the long war, however, Congress must do the following:

- Roll back excessive and ineffective security requirements such as 100 percent mandatory cargo screening;
- Consolidate the jurisdiction of congressional committees over the Department of Homeland Security, as recommended by the 9/11 Commission; and
- Reform programs that undermine federalism. Homeland security grants not only waste money but make state and local governments more dependent on Washington.

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