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OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

A Formula for Disaster

By THOMAS H. KEAN and LEE H. HAMILTON

SINCE the passage of the USA Patriot Act of 2001, the federal government has distributed more than \$8 billion to help local police departments, firefighters and emergency medical technicians pay for equipment and training to prepare for terrorist attacks, including nuclear, radiological, chemical or biological strikes. In our report, the 9/11 commission recommended that this assistance "be based strictly on an assessment of risks and vulnerabilities." It seemed obvious to us that national security resources should be deployed where the threat is greatest.

Unfortunately, the original Patriot Act did not require these funds to be allocated on the basis of risk. Billions have been distributed with virtually no risk assessment, and little planning. Nor has the federal government set preparedness standards to help state and local governments use the money wisely. The District of Columbia used part of its grant to buy leather jackets and to send sanitation workers to self-improvement seminars. Newark bought air-conditioned garbage trucks. Columbus, Ohio, bought body armor for fire department dogs. These are not the priorities of a nation under threat.

The result of this disarray is that taxpayers have no guarantee that these billions have increased our overall level of national preparedness. The response to Hurricane Katrina suggests that we have not come far.

Congress has a golden opportunity to repair this program before the end of the year. A House-Senate conference committee is negotiating a compromise bill to reauthorize the Patriot Act. The House-passed version included an excellent bipartisan formula for first responder grants, which would distribute money strictly based on risks and vulnerabilities.

States would have to submit a detailed security plan to the Department of Homeland Security, and a board drawing on top officials from the department and from the Department of Agriculture (a critical agency for responding to threats to the food supply) would review applications for grants and set priorities. These and other provisions in the House formula would ensure that the grants actually improve national security.

Unfortunately, this provision will not become part of the final Patriot Act bill - it will not become law-unless six senators in the conference committee support it. So far, only five do. We hope that the remaining five senators will join in supporting the House provision.

Small states and rural areas have little reason to fear the House formula. The House approach does not favor urban areas or large states based on preconceived notions of threat. Rather, it creates an objective process to assess risk, vulnerability and the consequences of an attack.

House members from states large and small, districts urban and rural, recognized this when they approved the risk-based formula 409-10, an overwhelming bipartisan majority. Risk assessment is not a competition between states - its goal is to ensure that all of our nation is protected.

This reform is too important to fail by one vote. We are a nation under threat, and these funds are a critical element in our defense. Our elected representatives need to demonstrate leadership and act to increase the safety of the American people.

Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton are, respectively, the former chairman and vice chairman of the 9/11 commission.