

'Terrorists will strike again'

By James R. Thompson, a member of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (the Sept. 11 commission)

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In July 2004, the Sept. 11 commission made 41 urgent recommendations to prevent and prepare for terrorist attacks. These recommendations flowed directly from our investigation of Sept. 11, 2001, and the failures that allowed the terrorists' plot to succeed.

Earlier this month, the 10 former commissioners came together for the last time, to issue a "report card" grading action on those reforms. The results were dismal: five F's, 12 D's, nine C's and only one A (an A-minus). Progress in many important areas has been slow or non-existent. While the terrorists have been learning and adapting, we have been moving at a bureaucratic crawl.

The most glaring failures include:

Aviation security (Grades: C, D, F). Most Americans take it for granted that airline security problems have been fixed, or that terrorists will not target our aviation system again. Both assumptions are wrong.

The enemy will find and exploit any soft spots in our security. Though we have hardened airliners against hijacking, they remain vulnerable to onboard explosions, such as the dual Chechen suicide bombings that brought down two Russian airliners in August 2004.

To secure commercial aviation, the commission recommended screening airline passengers for explosives (Grade: C); inspecting checked baggage and cargo shipped on commercial flights before it is loaded onto airliners and stored beneath airline passengers' feet (Grade: D); and requiring the Transportation Security Administration, not the airlines, to prescreen airline passengers against a consolidated terrorist watch list (Grade: F).

These grades do not reflect the urgency we all felt after Sept. 11, when Congress made airport security a federal responsibility. Four years later such poor progress in this area is hard to believe.

Public safety communications (Grade: F). In the post-Sept. 11 security environment, local public safety agencies are expected to shoulder a frontline national security responsibility, especially in major urban areas, like Chicago. Just like our men and women in uniform fighting terrorists overseas, the first responders to terrorist attacks at

home deserve the best communications technology and equipment the U.S. government can provide.

Four years after the attacks, we are not even close. Communication woes that hindered rescue efforts on Sept. 11 again plagued the response to Hurricane Katrina. We still are sending our first responders into danger unprepared, without the real-time communications they need to do their jobs and keep us safe.

The commission proposed a common-sense solution: that Congress allocate more broadcast frequencies (or "spectrum") for public safety use. In 1996, to facilitate the transition from analog to digital TV, the federal government temporarily doubled the spectrum available to local TV broadcasters. Almost 10 years later, with the transition to digital well under way, setting aside some of the original analog frequencies for our first responders would enable more powerful, more reliable communications systems for disaster response.

This proposal has not been adopted, and the problem has not been solved, even after Katrina. Pending budget legislation, which may or may not pass Congress this year, would implement this recommendation--but not until 2009. For a nation under threat, four more years is far too long to wait.

Risk-based homeland security funding (Grade: F). We are a nation at war. Scarce resources devoted to protecting the homeland must be deployed where the enemy intends to strike--and where we are most vulnerable.

Since 2001, Congress has allocated more than \$8 billion to help state and local governments prevent and prepare for terrorist attacks. These are critical funds for national security, so the commission made the seemingly obvious recommendation that the funds be distributed based on an impartial assessment of risk and vulnerability.

Unfortunately, Congress has treated homeland security as a typical revenue-sharing pork-barrel program, scattering the funds among the states rather than targeting them based strictly on risk. While the distribution has been bad, the use of this money often has been worse. Newark, N.J., used homeland security grants for air-conditioned garbage trucks. Washington sent sanitation workers to self-improvement seminars. Columbus, Ohio, bought body armor for Fire Department dogs.

Pork-barrel politics is expected for bridges and roads--not for defending against a deadly enemy trying to kill thousands of Americans. Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff is working hard to distribute some of the funds based on risk despite congressionally imposed restrictions favoring a pork-barrel system. Congress had a golden opportunity to implement a risk-based system in pending legislation to reauthorize the USA Patriot Act. Instead, a small group of senators focused on parochial interests blocked this reform yet again.

After the murder of almost 3,000 of our fellow Americans, C's, D's and F's are simply

unacceptable. Every reasonable expert believes the terrorists will strike again. Many believe their goal is to outdo the carnage and death of Sept. 11. If they do, and these problems have not been addressed, what excuse will we have?

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