America Still Unprepared, America Still in Danger

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The following Executive Summary taken from the Council on Foreign Relations-sponsored Independent Task Force report entitled, America Still Unprepared, America Still in Danger, should give you a sense of the pressing concerns the United States (US) faces as it strives to ensure the safety of the American people. Immediate action is required if we are to prevent future attacks on US soil.

The Task Force, led by former Senators Warren Rudman and Gary Hart, includes two former Secretaries of State, two former Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), and some of the nation’s most distinguished financial, legal, and medical authorities and was directed by one of the country’s leading authorities on homeland security, Council Senior Fellow Stephen Flynn.

Dedicated to creating a necessary sense of urgency and to helping get the necessary things done, the report warns “if the nation does not respond more urgently to address its vulnerabilities, the next attack could result in even greater casualties and widespread disruption to our lives and economy.”

This Task Force report has made an outstanding contribution to informing how we should proceed in the post-September 11 security environment. Shame on us if we do not pay heed both to the warning and wisdom of what is outlined in its pages.

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Executive Summary

“When you see the multiple attacks that you’ve seen occur around the world, from Bali to Kuwait, the number of failed attacks that have been attempted, the various messages that have been issued by senior al-Qaeda leaders, you must make the assumption that al-Qaeda is in an execution phase and intends to strike us both here and overseas; that’s unambiguous as far as I am concerned.”

—George Tenet, Director, Central Intelligence Testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, October 17, 2002

A year after September 11, 2001, America remains dangerously unprepared to prevent and respond to a catastrophic terrorist attack on US soil. In all likelihood, the next attack will result in even greater casualties and widespread disruption to American lives and the economy. The need for immediate action is made more urgent by the prospect of the United States going to war with Iraq and the possibility that Saddam Hussein might threaten the use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in America.
The Task Force recognizes that important and generally salutary measures have been undertaken since September 11 to respond to the risk of catastrophic terrorism, including pending legislation to create the Department of Homeland Security, which should be enacted on an urgent basis. Yet, there is still cause for concern. After a year without a new attack, there are already signs that Americans are lapsing back into complacency. Also, a war with Iraq could consume virtually all the nation’s attention and command the bulk of the available resources. President Bush has declared that combating terrorism requires a war on two fronts—at home and abroad. The Task Force believes the nation should respond accordingly. It outlines a number of homeland security priorities that should be pursued with the same sense of urgency and national purpose as our overseas exertions.

Among the risks that the United States still confronts:

♦ 650,000 local and state police officials continue to operate in a virtual intelligence vacuum, without access to terrorist watch lists provided by the US Department of State to immigration and consular officials.

♦ While 50,000 federal screeners are being hired at the nation’s airports to check passengers, only the tiniest percentage of containers, ships, trucks, and trains that enter the United States each day are subject to examination—and a weapon of mass destruction could well be hidden among this cargo. Should the maritime or surface elements of America’s global transportation system be used as a weapon delivery device, the response right now would almost certainly be to shut the system down at an enormous cost to the economies of the United States and its trade partners.

♦ First responders—police, fire, emergency medical technician personnel—are not prepared for a chemical or biological attack. Their radios cannot communicate with one another, and they lack the training and protective gear to protect themselves and the public in an emergency. The consequence of this could be the unnecessary loss of thousands of American lives.

♦ America’s own ill-prepared response could hurt its people to a much greater extent than any single attack by a terrorist. America is a powerful and resilient nation, and terrorists are not supermen. But the risk of self-inflicted harm to America’s liberties and way of life is greatest during and immediately following a national trauma.

♦ An adversary intent on disrupting America’s reliance on energy need not target oil fields in the Middle East. The homeland infrastructure for refining and distributing energy to support the daily lives of Americans remains largely unprotected to sabotage.

♦ While the overwhelming majority of the nation’s critical infrastructure is owned and operated by the private sector, significant legal barriers remain to forging effective private public partnerships on homeland security issues. These include potential antitrust conflicts, concerns about the public release of sensitive security
information by way of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), and liability exposure.

♦ Domestic security measures must be pursued within an international context. The critical infrastructures that support the daily lives of Americans are linked to global networks. Efforts to protect these systems will fail unless they are pursued abroad as well as at home.

♦ The National Guard is currently equipped and trained primarily for carrying out its role in supporting conventional combat units overseas. The homeland security mission can draw on many of these capabilities but it requires added emphasis on bolstering the capacity of National Guard units to respond to biological attacks; acquiring protection, detection, and other equipment that is tailored for complex urban environments; and special training to provide civil support in the aftermath of a large-scale catastrophic attack.

Key Recommendations

♦ Empower front-line agents to intercept terrorists by establishing a 24-hour operations center in each state that can provide access to terrorist watch list information via real time intergovernmental links between local and federal law enforcement.*

♦ Make first responders ready to respond by immediately providing federal funds to clear the backlog of requests for protective gear, training, and communications equipment. State and local budgets cannot bankroll these necessities in the near term.

♦ Recalibrate the agenda for transportation security; the vulnerabilities are greater and the stakes are higher in the sea and land modes than in commercial aviation. Systems such as those used in the aviation sector, which start from the assumption that every passenger and every bag of luggage poses an equal risk, must give way to more intelligence-driven and layered security approaches that emphasize prescreening and monitoring based on risk-criteria.

♦ Fund energy distribution vulnerability assessments to be completed in no more than six months, fund a stockpile of modular backup components to quickly restore the

* Editor’s Note: The Executive Summary of the Report to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the Minority Leader from the Subcommittee on Terrorism and Homeland Security (July 17, 2002) presents a series of recommendations aimed at strengthening homeland security and US preparedness, particularly in the intelligence area, for future terrorist attacks. The recommendation related to watch lists is as follows: “CIA should lead an effort to improve watch listing to ensure that all relevant agencies, including FBI, Homeland Security, and others, have access to a common database of up-to-date terrorist person-related data collected by US government agencies and other appropriate sources. The creation of a terrorism watch listing unit at CIA may be a useful first step.”
operation of the energy grid should it be targeted, and work with Canada to put in place adequate security measures for binational pipelines.

♦ Strengthen the capacity of local, state, and federal public health and agricultural agencies to detect and conduct disease outbreak investigations. The key to mitigating casualties associated with a biological attack against people or the food supply is to identify the source of infection as early as possible.

♦ Enact an “Omnibus Anti-Red Tape” law with a two-year sunset clause for approved private-public homeland security task forces to include: (1) a fast-track security clearance process that permits the sharing of “secret-level” classified information with non-federal and industry leaders; (2) a FOIA exemption in instances when critical infrastructure industry leaders agree to share information about their security vulnerabilities with federal agencies; (3) an exemption of private participants in these task forces from antitrust rules; (4) homeland security appropriations to be managed under the more liberal rules governing research and development programs in the Department of Defense rather than the normal Federal Acquisition Rules; and (5) liability safeguards and limits.

♦ Fund, equip, and train National Guard units around the country to ensure they can support the new state homeland security plans under development by each governor. Also, triple the number of National Guard Weapons of Mass Destruction Support Teams from 22 to 66.

Quickly mobilizing the nation to prepare for the worst is an act of prudence, not fatalism. In the 21st century, security and liberty are inseparable. The absence of adequate security elevates the risk that laws will be passed immediately in the wake of surprise terrorist attacks that will be reactive, not deliberative. Predictably, the consequence will be to compound the initial harm incurred by a tragic event with measures that overreach in terms of imposing costly new security mandates and the assumption of new government authorities that may erode our freedoms. Accordingly, aggressively pursuing America’s homeland security imperatives quickly and immediately may well be the most important thing we can do to sustain America’s cherished freedoms for future generations.

Preparedness at home plays a critical role in combating terrorism by reducing its appeal as an effective means of warfare. Acts of catastrophic terrorism produce not only deaths and physical destruction but also societal and economic disruption. Thus, as important as it is to try and attack terrorist organizations overseas and isolate those who support them, it is equally important to eliminate the incentive for undertaking these acts in the first place. By sharply reducing, if not eliminating, the disruptive effects of terrorism, America’s adversaries may be deterred from taking their battles to the streets of the American homeland.*

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