

The Low Risk From Immigrants; Off-Target Priorities For Homeland Defense

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Body

Of the many infuriating [assertions](#) in the [immigration debate](#), perhaps this one takes top prize: that we have to keep illegal **immigrants** out for the sake of our security. This notion is wrong, not just because undocumented workers are statistically [less likely](#) than native-born Americans to commit crimes or because they are serenely indifferent to al-Qaeda's teachings. It is wrong because it misses the most basic rule of smart **homeland** security.

Smart **homeland** security starts with the reality that you can't protect everything. The federal government alone spends more than \$58 billion on **homeland** security per year -- a sum greater than the entire **defense** budget of Britain and about three times the estimated level of the pre-2001 **homeland** security budget. This spending has bought important gains: There are air marshals on planes, cockpits have been reinforced and so on. But the United States contains half a million bridges, 500 skyscrapers and 2,800 power plants, not to mention thousands of schools, shopping malls and subway stations. Even if you doubled spending and then doubled it again, there would be too many **targets** to protect. Total security is unattainable.

So the name of the game is prioritization. There are two schools of thought as to how this should be done, and neither of them involves clamping down on **immigrants**. The [first school](#) says: Figure out what sort of attack would cause the most damage -- for example, an attack on an urban chemical plant that would unleash deadly gases. The [second school](#) says: Figure out which attacks are most likely -- al-Qaeda has demonstrated a fascination with aircraft, so spending \$9.16 per passenger on aviation security but only 6 cents for each mass-transit rider (as the federal government was found to do in 2004) may not actually be crazy.

Of course, both schools of thought are sometimes trumped by unschooled thoughtlessness. Last year the Department of **Homeland** Security was found to have a database of **priority** infrastructure that included Old MacDonald's Petting Zoo in Alabama, a bean festival in Georgia and the world's largest tinfoil ball in Ohio. The department's system for distributing grants has sometimes looked like a sick joke: In 2006 it cut support to obvious **target** cities such as Washington and New York in favor of Omaha and Louisville. But the good news is that these practices are widely understood to be absurd. A [bill](#) co-sponsored by Sens. [Hillary Clinton](#) and Barack Obama would allocate **homeland** security grants more rationally among states. Even Michael Chertoff, the **homeland** security secretary, has confessed that the grant-allocation system needs fixing.

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Which raises a few questions about the immigration bill in Congress. If Clinton and Obama are upset with the misallocation of homeland security funds, why aren't they yelling about the proposed crackdown on immigrants? As a Post editorial recently pointed out, the immigration bill would require that the Department of Homeland Security hire, train and deploy 5,000 to 6,000 new border agents; recruit and support several thousand civilian employees required to fingerprint and register immigrants; build 370 miles of border fence; and create a whiz-bang database that would allow businesses to check whether a prospective employee has entered the country illegally. In a world of limited homeland security dollars, how is any of this a priority?

Immigrants come to the United States because they like it here, but it's not as though we don't have real enemies. If Congress wants to build fences, perhaps it should consider fencing off suspension-bridge cables that could be cut by terrorists. If Congress is in a hiring mood, perhaps it should pay for extra coast guards to enhance port security. Former Coast Guard officer Stephen Flynn has described how a ship more than three football fields long arrives each week in the Boston harbor; it is full of natural gas, and by puncturing its side with a powerboat-bomb, terrorists could cause an inferno that would melt the city's waterfront. This is not especially far-fetched. Al-Qaeda used a small boat to attack the USS Cole in Yemen seven years ago.

One of the distressing features of our times is the absence of any moral link between the troops who risk their lives abroad and our domestic priorities. In most past conflicts, Americans on the home front have made at least a token sacrifice: They have accepted higher taxes, cultivated "victory gardens," faced the possibility that a family member might be drafted. This time around, there is no war tax, no draft and no sense that ordinary peacetime indulgences ought to be questioned. Even when those indulgences divert the government's attention from people who would kill us.

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