Why America Is Still An Easy Target

The author of the new book America the Vulnerable exposes how the U.S. has failed to protect its infrastructure from terrorists

By STEPHEN FLYNN

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Since Sept. 11, 2001, the U.S. has spent more than $500 million to make America's seaports more secure. Sound like a lot? It isn't.

That's about what the U.S. spends in Iraq in four days, notes Stephen Flynn, whose new book on homeland security, America the Vulnerable, concludes that the U.S. is scandalously unprepared for the next terrorist attack. Why? Because it still doesn't see protecting the homeland as a priority. Flynn, a retired U.S. Coast Guard commander and a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, says our leaders harbor the delusion that the real fight against terrorism is overseas. In the meantime, the U.S. has made scant progress in protecting its own infrastructure.

Having spent years visiting America's high-risk targets, Flynn offers a damning assessment and some solutions as well.

If Sept. 11, 2001, was a wake-up call, clearly America has fallen back asleep. With the exception of airports, much of what is critical to our way
of life remains unprotected: water and food supplies; refineries, energy grids and pipelines; bridges, tunnels, trains, trucks and cargo containers; as well as the cyberbackbone that underpins the information age in which we live. The security measures we have been cobbling together are hardly fit to deter amateur thieves, vandals and hackers, never mind determined terrorists. Worse still, small improvements are often oversold as giant steps forward, lowering the guard of average citizens as they carry on their daily routine with an unwarranted sense of confidence. For instance, while the flying public is busy shedding shoes and bags at X-ray check-in points, the tons of air freight being loaded into the belly of most commercial airliners continues to fly the American skies virtually uninspected.

The U.S. has no rival when it comes to projecting its military, economic and cultural power around the world. But we are practically defenseless at home. In 2002 alone, more than 400 million people, 122 million cars, 11 million trucks, 2.4 million rail freight cars, approximately 8 million maritime containers and 56,596 vessels entered the U.S. at more than 3,700 terminals and 301 ports of entry.

In general, frontline agents have only a matter of seconds to make a go/no-go decision on whether to allow entry: 30 seconds for people and one minute for vehicles. And then there are the 7,000 miles of land borders and 95,000 miles of shoreline, which provide ample opportunities to walk, swim or sail into the nation. Official estimates place the number of illegal migrants living in America at 7 million. Given these immense numbers, it is a sense of futility, fueled by the lack of vision about what sensible measures are worth pursuing, that lies at the heart of our national inertia on the homeland-security issue.

Security Immaturity

The reality is that our old national-security dogs are having a difficult time learning new tricks. The Department of Defense is not busy dusting off contingency plans to protect the homeland, because there are none on the shelf. For decades, the national-security establishment has not been in the business of protecting the territory of the U.S. at our borders—or within them. The Pentagon has embraced a "forward defense" approach in which our troops are primarily based, and trained to fight, overseas. Washington has long known that agencies that do shoulder the domestic security burden, like the U.S. Coast Guard, lack the staffing, training or equipment to do the job. The Coast Guard is charged with protecting America's lengthy shoreline and an "Exclusive Economic Zone" that extends 200 miles offshore covering 3.36 million sq. mi., with a force about the same size as the New York City police department, deployed on a fleet of ancient vessels and aircraft. The Customs Service has been no better off than the Coast Guard.

How is it possible that so little is being done? Part of the problem is that Washington continues to treat domestic and national security as distinguishable from each other. Our current approach is for the Federal Government and the military to deal with the distant game and leave the job of tackling the home game to state and local government and to the private entities that own and operate our society's critical infrastructure, like bridge-and-tunnel authorities.
President Bush effectively said as much to the National Governors Association in February 2003. As Governor Edward Rendell of Pennsylvania reported after that session, "President Bush was honest and frank. He told us there's no more money for anything. He said essentially, 'You're on your own.'"

There is an equity issue here that deserves consideration. More than 40% of all containerized cargo that arrives in the harbor of Long Beach and Los Angeles, for example, is destined for the American interior. Is it appropriate that the security of that harbor be shouldered primarily by Los Angeles County taxpayers? Or how about the privately owned Ambassador Bridge, across which so much U.S.-Canadian trade passes each day? Should it fall only to the shareholders to secure the world's busiest commercial border crossing?

**Containers: Terror in a Box?**

In March 2002, the group managing director of the world's largest shipping-terminal operator traveled from Hong Kong to Washington to find out how the U.S. government was handling container security and to offer help. John Meredith had spent much of his life at sea. At age 14 he signed on to work aboard a British merchant ship. Now, as head of Hutchison Port Holdings, he sits on top of a $5 billion company that in 2003 moved more than 40 million boxes through its terminals in 35 ports in 17 countries. While Hutchison owns no terminals in the U.S., 4 out of every 10 ocean containers that arrive in a U.S. port either originate from one of its facilities or pass through one of them.

A conversation with Meredith is sobering. When I talked with him, he began by declaring that there was no doubt that containers are going to be exploited as a poor man's missile. The question is when, not if. Explosives, or even a weapon of mass destruction, could be readily loaded into a container at its point of origin or anywhere along its way to a marine terminal. Port terminal operators have no way of confirming whether what is advertised as the contents of a box is what is actually there. The measure of a commercial port's success, after all, is its ability to move cargo in and out of its turf as quickly as possible. Beyond an attack, Meredith is worried about the cascading consequences should the U.S. close its ports after a terrorist incident occurs. Because 90% of the world's general cargo moves inside these boxes, when boxes stop moving, so do assembly lines. Shelves at retailers like Wal-Mart and Home Depot start to go bare.

The challenge of securing the loading and movement of containers is formidable. Anyone can lease one of the many millions of containers that circulate around the globe, then pack it with up to 65,000 lbs. of items, close the door and lock it with a seal that costs half a dollar. The box then enters the transportation system, with all the providers working diligently to get it where it needs to go as quickly as possible. Accompanying documents usually describe the contents in general terms. If the box moves through intermediate ports before it enters the U.S., the container manifest typically indicates only the details known to the final transportation carrier.

For instance, a container could start in Central Asia, travel to an interior port in Europe, move by train to the Netherlands, cross the Atlantic by
ship to Canada and then move by rail to Chicago. The manifest submitted to U.S. customs often will say only that the container is being shipped from Halifax and originated from Rotterdam. If a container is destined for a city inside the U.S., only in exceptional circumstances would it be inspected at the arrival port.

On average, overseas containers will pass through 17 intermediate points before they arrive at their final U.S. destination, and often their contents come from several locations before they are even loaded into the box. Nearly 40% of all containers shipped to the U.S. are the maritime-transportation equivalent of the back of a UPS van.

Intermediaries known as consolidators gather together goods or packages from a variety of customers or even other intermediaries and load them all into the container. They know only what their customers tell them about what they are shipping.

Despite the complexity of this shipment process, the U.S. approach to monitoring the flow of boxes is startlingly simple. U.S. customs inspectors divide the universe of containers into two categories—trusted and untrusted. A trusted container is one being shipped to an importer or by a consolidator known to customs inspectors. Essentially, they are repeat customers who have no history of smuggling or trying to violate other U.S. laws. These boxes are cleared by customs officers without any examination.

Untrusted containers are those that come from the world's trouble spots, from new importers who have no established record of clearing customs or who trigger some other alarm, suggesting that an inspection is warranted. Rather than loading a weapon in a first-time shipment from a company in Afghanistan, which will almost certainly be examined by U.S. inspectors, terrorists are likely to take the time to figure out how to target the shipments of an established company. In fact, in the post-9/11 world, we should assume that bad guys will target a trusted box first.

What should a new transportation-security regime look like? It turns out that the problem is more manageable than the numbers suggest.

This is because virtually all boxes will pass through just a handful of seaports if they are going to find their way to the U.S. In fact, approximately 70% of the 8 million containers that arrived in U.S. ports in 2002 originated from or moved through just four overseas terminal operators: Hutchison Port Holdings, P&O Ports, PSA International and Maersk Sealand. The fact that transportation of maritime containers is concentrated in so few places and managed by so few hands makes it an extraordinary pressure point. The major terminal operators should be the gatekeepers who ensure that only secure boxes will be loaded onto ships that cross the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

To guarantee that a container belonging to a trusted shipper has not in fact been compromised, we should insist that it be loaded in an approved secure facility at its point of origin. A digital series of photographs, each with a time signature, would capture images of the loading process, including when a security seal is activated. All these images would be stored on a data chip with the container or be transmitted electronically to the appropriate authorities in the loading port. The container should be outfitted with light, temperature or pressure sensors that could detect an
unauthorized intrusion. Additionally, there should be an internal sensor that could detect indications of gamma and neutron emissions associated with a nuclear weapon or dirty bomb, prohibited chemicals and biological substances or CO2 generated by a stowaway. A container-tracking device could keep a global positioning system (GPS) record of the route that the container travels.

Once a container arrives at a terminal, it would have to pass through a nonintrusive inspection unit equipped to detect radiation, interrogate the sensors installed in the box and create a cat-scan-style image of its contents. This image, along with other sensor data, would be forwarded to all the national customs authorities along the route. Sharing data would allow experts to remotely monitor frontline agents. Knowing that their inspection could be double-checked would make these agents less willing to accept a payoff to look the other way. This extra set of eyes would also provide another chance to detect problems.

Assuming that a ship made it into port without incident, its containers should be selectively spot-checked. Containers should pass through radiation detectors, and a scanned image at the arrival port should be compared with the image taken at the loading port. If the images and sensor data match, it can be safely concluded that the shipment has not been tampered with and it can be released. The containers should then be tracked as they move to their final destination, allowing the ability to intercept the shipment in the face of late-breaking intelligence.

Right now the odds stand at about 10% that our current targeting and inspection practices would detect a device similar to a Russian nuclear warhead surrounded by shielding material. By using a mix of sensors and more vigorous monitoring, we could push the probability of detection into the 90% range. The cost of installing cargo-scanning equipment in all the world's marine container terminals would be $500 million to $600 million, or about the cost of four new F-22 fighters. A container outfitted with sensors and tracking equipment, and certified at its origin, would run approximately $50 per shipment or add 1.5% to the average overseas shipping cost.

**Weapons in Plain Sight: Chemical Plants**

Our enemies do not need to smuggle chemical weapons into our ports or across our borders. Just as the 9/11 attackers succeeded in converting domestic aircraft into missiles, chemical facilities and the thousands of tons of chemicals that move each day around the U.S. on trucks, trains and barges could be targeted by terrorists to devastating effect. All told, there are about 15,000 chemical plants, refineries and other sites in the U.S. that store large quantities of hazardous materials on their property. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, there are 709 sites where the toll of death or injury from a catastrophic disaster at a chemical plant could reach from 100,000 to more than 1 million people.

There are no federal laws that establish minimum security standards at chemical facilities. Basic measures such as posting warning signs and fencing, controlling access and maintaining 24-hour surveillance are required for only 21% of the 15,000 sites that store large quantities of hazardous materials. Chemical railcars routinely sit parked for extended periods near residential areas or are shipped through the heart of urban centers. Each week shipments of such substances as deadly chloride are
carried on slow-moving trains that pass within a few hundred yards of Capitol Hill in Washington.

Chemical barges that move up and down America's inland waterways are unmonitored. It is the very ubiquity of the U.S. chemical industry that gives it potential to be a serious source of national alarm.

BioWeapons: Locally unprepared

The Bush administration is putting in place a system called BioWatch, which involves installing and monitoring a nationwide set of air sensors to check for the presence of smallpox, anthrax and other pathogens. The Federal Government is also in the early stages of developing a public-health surveillance system built on monitoring the health databases of eight major cities for signs of disease outbreak. Finally, the Strategic National Stockpile has been boosted so adequate medications can be rushed to designated sites within 12 hours.

These are positive steps, but as with so many of our homeland-security efforts, they come with too few resources to address the need. Surveillance systems should be up and running in all our major metropolitan areas. Americans are always on the move.

If a biological weapon is released in an urban area that is not being monitored, a contagious disease could spread into multiple states before the first alarm is sounded.

Even if a bio-attack is detected early and the federal stockpile of medications is shipped to the airport of the targeted city right away, our troubles are still not over. According to a study of emergency responses to a hypothetical anthrax attack, completed in 2003 by operations researchers Lawrence Wein, David Craft and Edward Kaplan, the release of just 2 lbs. of weapons-grade anthrax dispersed into the air from a tall building in an American city could result in more than 120,000 deaths. The reason for this huge death toll is that the distribution of antibiotics at "street level" would be too slow to treat victims early enough, and once people developed symptoms, they would overwhelm the capabilities of medical facilities. These findings were confirmed in a classified exercise run by the Federal Government in the fall of 2003.

Why We Need to Act Now

Over the past few years, I have traveled across america speaking to audiences candidly about our national state of insecurity. Initially I approached the enterprise with some trepidation, given that my message was unsettling. But it became clear that people want to hear the facts, however alarming. Even more encouraging has been the extent to which everyday people have expressed their sincere desire to be helpful in some way.

This attitude stands in marked contrast to the sense of skepticism, even resignation, with which the general public has greeted the periodic raising and lowering of the terror-alert levels. Especially worrisome is the extent to which the public appears willing to second-guess official directives. According to a Columbia University study released in August 2003, 90% of Americans polled said they would not evacuate their homes in a time of crisis based only on a government order to do so. Public-health
officials are increasingly worried that weak public confidence in official guidance will undermine their efforts to carry out mass vaccinations and impose quarantines in the face not only of bioterrorist attacks but also of outbreaks of SARS and other naturally occurring diseases. Washington should be working overtime to stem this erosion in public trust. But the government's tendency to deal behind closed doors with all security matters is only fueling the problem. Former Senator Warren Rudman, who co-chaired the U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, predicts "there will be hell to pay" when the quiet decisions to postpone the response to known vulnerabilities become public knowledge in the aftermath of the next attack.

Americans will be rightfully enraged to learn that senior officials were aware of the threat but had concluded that putting adequate safeguards in place to protect their citizens was too difficult or too expensive and then hid from the electorate both the reality of the danger and the decision not to do much about it.

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