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Fear of responsibility

By Richard W. Rahn

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When the next terrorist incident occurs in the U.S., who do you think Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean, Democratic Sens. Harry Reid of Nevada and Hillary Clinton of New York and much of the national news media will blame? If you said President Bush and the Republican Congress, you understand the "politics of terrorism."

It will be charged not enough was spent to protect Americans from bombs on (insert appropriate noun for the incident -- buses, trains, airplanes, ships, buildings, bridges, etc.). Of course, the Republicans know this is what will be said.

As a result, huge amounts of dollars are spent, and our civil liberties curtailed to protect politicians from both parties from the charge they "did not do enough to protect us." Much of this new expenditure is not enhancing our protection, but only weakening us economically, and the never-ending restrictions on civil liberties undermine the freedoms we hold dear.

Assume you are a terrorist, and in your twisted little mind, you actually think you will get 70 virgins, or whatever, if you become a martyr by killing innocent Americans. You think, "Hey, I will go blow up the Washington Monument." So you go to Washington, check out the Monument, and learn it will take a lot of explosives. The stone walls are 15 feet at the base and barriers have recently been built around it and visitor security checks instituted (which makes tourists even more miserable).

Now, is Mr. Terrorist likely to say, "Oh, it's going to be hard to blow up the Washington Monument, so I will forget about the 70 virgins," or will he find an easier target?

There will always be an almost infinite number of easier targets, so it probably makes little sense to harden most buildings and monuments, because this only shifts the destruction and does not reduce the loss of life. It sounds harsh, but anything man built can be rebuilt. Remember we rebuilt the White House and the Capitol after the British burned them in the War of 1812.

Around Washington alone, there are hundreds, if not thousands, of monuments, important buildings, subway stations, etc. for a determined terrorist to select from. If we tried to protect every potential terrorist target, we would soon bankrupt the country. As a result of the London bombings, politicians demand the federal government protect every bus and

subway car in America. (Even in heavily fortified Israel, it was impossible to protect all the buses, so Israelis sensibly focused on keeping potential terrorists out of the country.)

Osama and his ilk can only win if they make us so fearful we give up our liberties and waste monies on the illusion we can build an unlimited number of fortresses to protect ourselves.

In a new paper, written by Melanie Scarborough for the Cato Institute, titled "The Security Pretext: An Examination of the Growth of Federal Police Agencies," the author details how the political fear of not funding has resulted in a huge and often wasteful growth in federal police agencies and a dangerous increase in abuses and limitations on our civil liberties.

For instance, the Capitol Police (one of the several police forces that guard the Capitol and members of Congress) will soon have one officer for every four members of Congress. When asked to justify this growth, the Capitol Police Board chairman said the larger force was necessary to protect "not only the institution and the members, but also the officers themselves."

So, the logic is that the more policemen we have, the more policemen we need to protect the additional policemen -- so hey, let's make everyone a policeman (and we can be just like the old East Germany).

The serious question we face is how to bring some sanity and rationality to "protecting us from terrorism." Fortunately, we have some successful precedents for dealing with the problem. At the end of the Cold War, it was widely recognized the U.S. military had far too many bases. Despite recommendations from the Pentagon, Congress proved itself unable to let go of any excess bases because the base represented "pork" in some members' districts, and members made deals to protect their bases by protecting the other fellows' bases.

Former House Majority Leader Dick Army came up with the solution of having a base-closing commission that would select the bases to be closed unless a supermajority of the Congress voted to overturn the recommendations.

We need to take spending on homeland security out of the usual political process before the country loses all civil liberties and is bankrupted. Thus, Congress and the administration should create a nonpartisan, independent agency (which is in their own self-interests) with the responsibility for professional cost-benefit studies of every anti-terrorism proposal presented to it by its members or the administration.

Only when the agency determines a proposal makes economic and civil liberties' sense, could Congress consider funding it.

To succeed, the agency would need a very strong board of distinguished economists, law enforcement experts and civil libertarians drawn from across the political spectrum who

could take the predictable flack from politicians and media when the next terrorism incident occurs.

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