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# OPINION

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### D.C. must get serious about our security

Tuesday, August 03, 2004

If you were frightened by the latest terror warnings, you have plenty of company in downtown Newark.



**TOM MORAN**  
On Politics

Al Qaeda operatives were here, under our noses, casing the Prudential building in the heart of the downtown. And they were meticulous -- the report on the building is lengthy and covers every detail.

"These people want to kill us," says former Gov. Thomas Kean, chairman of the Sept. 11 commission. "There's no other way to put it."

Kean wants us to be scared. And for good reason.

Because he believes the federal government still hasn't gotten serious about homeland security. And when you look at the facts, it is hard to argue with him.

Consider that Wyoming is getting four times as much homeland security money, per person, as New Jersey. The money is being handed out on the basis of politics, not on any rational calculation of risk.

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Consider that 19 out of 20 containers entering Port Elizabeth are not searched before they are placed onto trucks and railroad cars and sent on their way. Yes, it would be expensive to do more. But we are sparing no expense in Iraq.

The most chilling lapse of all comes, unfortunately, from our own back yard. Seven chemical facilities in New Jersey hold enough toxic material so that a terrorist attack could kill or injure 1 million people, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Sen. Jon Corzine (D-N.J.) wrote a bill requiring these companies to substitute safer materials when feasible, and to submit crisis plans to the federal government for review. It was a modest start, and it passed with bipartisan support in committee by a 21-0 vote.

Then the chemical industry lobbyists woke up and killed the bill in its tracks.

"I didn't expect the industry's influence to be so decisive," Corzine says. "This is a classic case where money colored a policy decision. It's almost criminal."

One of the most vulnerable plants is in Hudson County. If it were attacked, a chlorine gas cloud could endanger up to 12 million people, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

It sits near a bridge, and Corzine says a person with a good arm could probably throw a grenade from the bridge and hit the chlorine tanks.

"We slipped back to business as usual," he says. "We haven't even passed an appropriation bill for the Department of Homeland Defense. But somehow, we've found time to discuss the (gay) marriage amendment."

Perfect security is a dream, of course. Al Qaeda might find a way to slip through any defenses we put in its way. And there is a point of diminishing returns, when the next dollar we spend on homeland defense will buy us less and less security.

But we aren't anywhere near that point yet. If we defend the chemical plants, al Qaeda might be forced to choose a target that's not as lethal. If we shift homeland defense money to places at greatest risk, our odds will improve. And if we search three times as many shipping containers, it will triple our chances of making a stop.

"Nothing will make us 100 percent safe," Kean said. "But to use that as an excuse to sit on our hands is nonsense. We can save a lot of lives."

Kean's report is helping to turn the tide. But it's worth remembering that President Bush, who now embraces some its recommendations, initially opposed forming the commission at all.

He yielded when the political pressure generated by the families of 9/11 victims became too great to ignore. Corzine singles out the now-famous four women from New Jersey whose husbands were killed that day.

"More people should have the sense of urgency that we saw from the Jersey girls," he says. "We need to turn up the heat. And this warning

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does help. It reinforces the fact that there are real threats."

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