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Sensible security funding

Tuesday, August 03, 2004

Wyoming, Montana and Nebraska aren't much like Newark, New York or Washington, D.C. Aside from the population comparisons and other considerations, the square-shaped states don't have a lot of machine-gun-toting, body-armor-clad police patrolling their streets just now.

The East Coast cities, home to Prudential, Citigroup, the New York Stock Exchange, the International Monetary Fund and other giant financial institutions, are now in the cross hairs of al Qaeda. The rural states don't have many of these "iconic" targets, as Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge calls them, symbols of America's wealth and power that terrorists would love to destroy.

Unfortunately, the formula used to distribute federal anti-terror aid doesn't reflect the differences between Newark and Omaha.

The cops outside the Prudential building -- and many more at the tunnels and bridges, on the trains and at the ports -- are the last line of defense against an attack by car or truck bomb. The protection is vital at any cost, but the cost is huge.

New Jersey spent more than \$12 million responding to the three prior federal terror alerts, most of it on overtime pay. The state got a federal reimbursement of less than a third. New York will get as much as \$50 million in badly needed extra federal funding to pay for security at the Republican National Convention in a few weeks. New Jersey, which must help with train, ferry and other protection, is getting nothing extra on top of its regular yearly allotment of \$87.4 million.

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New Jersey ranked 41st in the nation for per capita homeland security funding during the past two years. The Garden State received \$25.64 per person. Wyoming got \$101.60. U.S. Sens. Jon Corzine and Frank Lautenberg, both Democrats, and Rep. Robert Menendez (D-13th Dist.) yesterday called for anti-terror grants to be distributed on the basis of risk. The 9/11 commission made a similar recommendation.

Congress can and should make the change as soon as possible. The House of Representatives is considering competing versions of legislation to provide \$3.4 billion for next year's homeland security programs. Two proposals would more or less continue the practice of giving every state and federal territory an equal "base" percentage of the money, regardless of local conditions. Those should be dropped in favor of two others that recognize that homeland security funding shouldn't be beholden to political expediency.

Doling out this money based on anything other than threat is a waste of scarce resources. Just ask the cops with the machine guns and the flak jackets.

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