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Trends. Homeland Security and the Problem of What Counts

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses and evaluates claims that “the Bush Administration’s policies and programs for homeland security...too sparsely [invest] in relevant initiatives.”

Opponents of the Bush Administration’s policies and programs for homeland security often assert that the Administration is investing too sparsely in relevant initiatives. For example, Benjamin and Simon (2003) state that “as much as \$160 billion in new financing has been poured into national security since 9/11, but only a small fraction has been used to make Americans safer at home.” The question then becomes what within a national security rubric qualifies as helping Americans becoming safer.

The authors opine that “troops, conventional weapons systems and traditional military investments” don’t qualify. Instead, “aviation security, vaccine research and a stockpile of vital drugs” do. The authors’ inference is that what’s outside the formally defined homeland security budget counts, while what’s inside does not. The fact is, however, that all military, law enforcement, and intelligence assets have consequences for homeland security--as do health, education, and all other initiatives taken by the Administration. Further, the phenomena contributing to homeland security go far beyond what the Administration seeks to influence and is even aware of. It could well turn out that the biggest contributor to homeland security might be the Administration’s international information programs targeting various foreign audiences or the Administration’s trade and aid initiatives, or other events and phenomena taken or influenced by other political actors for reasons seeming to have nothing to do with security on their face value.

Like arguing over the number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin, parsing the intricacies of a formally defined homeland security budget may be creative, inspirational, and little to do with the material and mental worlds within which terrorism resides. (See Benjamin, D., & Simon, S. (February 20, 2003). The worst defense. *The New York Times*, p. A31; Post, J. M., Ruby, K. G., & Shaw, E. D. (2002). The radical group in context: 2. Identification of critical elements in the analysis of risk for terrorism by radical group type. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 25, 101-126; Tetlock, P. E., McGuire, C. B., & Mitchell, G. (1991). Psychological perspectives on nuclear deterrence. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 42, 239-276; Wehr, P. (1988). Commensurate security: An alternative defense paradigm. *Journal of Social Issues*, 44, 155-173.)