

# Bush's Homeland Insecurity

By John Gershman, Co-Director of Foreign Policy In Focus | September 9, 2003

Two years after the 9-11 attacks, funding for emergency responders—firefighters, law enforcement officers, public health and emergency medical personnel, and others first on the scene in case of a terrorist attack—remains dangerously low.

While the Bush administration focuses on funding the occupation of Iraq, it's failing to insure the security of Americans at home. The needs are real and don't involve lots of new, fancy technology. Funds are needed to place essential equipment in the hands of emergency personnel and provide them with the appropriate training.

Examples of glaring weaknesses abound:

- On average, according to the National Fire Protection Association, fire departments across the country have only enough radios to equip half the firefighters on a shift, and breathing apparatuses for only a third. Only 10% of U.S. fire departments have the personnel and equipment to respond to a building collapse.
- Many of America's 73,000 police, fire, and other public-safety agencies still can't talk to each other in major emergencies due to a lack of interoperable communications systems.
- Most states' public health labs still lack basic equipment and expertise to respond adequately to a chemical or biological attack. Only two state labs can test for biotoxins and 39 states recently reported that their laboratories were not prepared to safely accept samples that might contain multiple hazards (e.g., a chemical and a biological agent).
- Most cities do not have the necessary equipment to determine what kind of hazardous materials emergency responders may be facing.
- To date there has not been a substantial training exercise to test national and local readiness in response to a chemical attack.

This state of affairs is inexcusable two years after the 9-11 attacks. It represents a telling contrast with the

Bush administration willingness to mobilize political resources to secure funding for war and occupation in Iraq or cut taxes on the wealthy.

For example, only about \$750 million in federal funds was directed to the nation's three million first responders in 2002 for training and equipment for responding to terrorist attacks, when the administration had promised \$3.5 billion. Even worse is the transfer of necessary funding for basic services to fund the fight against terrorism. For example, the administration's proposed 2004 budget includes \$2 billion in cuts from crime prevention and public safety programs.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration has prioritized tax cuts benefiting the wealthy over our essential homeland security requirements.

The current federal budget calls for spending \$27 billion for emergency responders over the next five years, while local and state governments plan to spend up 3 times that amount over the same period. Professional associations of emergency responders and leading emergency response officials from around the country estimate that these planned expenditures fall roughly \$100 billion short of what's needed to insure that emergency responders have the training and equipment they need to respond to future terrorist attacks. This shortfall of \$20 billion per year represents a few months of funding for the \$1 billion per week occupation in Iraq. The federal equivalent of loose change won't meet our emergency responders' needs.

Even more troubling is that the Bush administration and its allies in Congress have allowed homeland security funds to be treated like candy in a piñata. Funding for emergency responders has been allocated as new forms of pork barrel spending rather than



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hard-headed assessments of where vulnerabilities and needs are greatest, thereby placing many Americans at greater risk.

To pick just one example, Wyoming (Vice President Dick Cheney's home state) receives \$10.00 per capita from the Department of Homeland Security for emergency preparedness while New York State receives only \$1.40 per capita.

Allowing the Bush administration to play politics as usual with homeland security programs is unacceptable. The potential cost in lives is too great, and it challenges us to honor the memories of those public servants who made the ultimate sacrifice on 9-11.

America's local emergency responders will always be the first to confront terrorist incidents. Their efforts in the first moments following an attack will be essential to saving lives and reducing panic.

Their courage—like the police and fire professionals who entered the World Trade Center on September 11—insures that they will respond to crises with whatever resources they have. We must demand that they have what they need to do their jobs safely and effectively. Our security requires it. Honoring the memories of those who sacrificed their lives on September 11th demands it.

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Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©2003. All rights reserved.

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Recommended citation:

John Gershman, "Bush's Homeland Insecurity," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, September 9, 2003).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2003/0309emergency.html>

Production Information:

Writer: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

