

Are We Safer? An Online Symposium on the 10th Anniversary of 9/11

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Before the September 11, 2001, attack by al Qaeda, outside of New York City and Los Angeles, the vast enterprise of federal, state, and local entities that comprise our domestic security paid no meaningful attention to the threat of terrorists. Despite ten years of bombings across the globe beginning in 1991, including the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, America really was a sleeping giant. Our national slumber ended ten years ago.

Just the fact that most Americans now readily acknowledge that terrorists want to attack us domestically and, even if grudgingly, accept the vast majority of measures erected after September 11 makes us safer. At times, those measures did in fact work to keep us safe. Other times, pure luck or incompetency kept us free from catastrophic harm.

So, we should rightly celebrate the last ten years and the efforts of thousands of men and women who work tirelessly to keep us safe. That said, the financial cost to put in place all of the measures—from a new federal department to wars overseas to tens of billions of dollars in grants to states and localities—has been too high. The damage done to our Nation's federalism principle also suffered these last ten years.

We could have achieved the same level of security and a much lower cost financially and constitutionally.

As we point out in our new Heritage Foundation report, "Homeland Security 4.0: Overcoming Centralization, Complacency, and Politics," too often the response to September 11 involved federalizing functions that had historically and constitutionally rested with states and localities and ignoring the vastly greater experience and resources residing in our states. Despite decades of community policing work, the federal government came to see local law enforcement as a mere data collector and not the robust tip of the spear it actually is.

Similarly, as naïve as it may sound, politics inserted itself in too many places after September 11. Specifically, homeland security grant programs intended to build critical capabilities in high risk places became political pork barrel programs where everybody lined up at the trough. Likewise, some have tried to use cargo security to increase longshoreman union membership no matter the harm to the economy of slowing down supply chains. And, of course, there is our airport passenger screening process that lacks common sense and adheres too much to political correctness.

We can and must do better, especially given the fiscal crises at all levels of government. Because our enemies must only succeed once to harm us, our homeland security enterprise must not rely upon luck and incompetency to remain safe. It is time we renewed our belief in federalism and exercised some fiscal restraint. Our safety is best secured outside of Washington, D.C.

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