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The Senate Homeland Security Bill: More Hits Than Misses

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The contrast between the Senate's Improving America's Security Act of 2007 (S. 4) and the legislation passed last month in the House, the Implementing the 9/11 Commission Recommendations Act of 2007 (H.R. 1), is stark. While purporting to implement the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission, the House bill offered little more than "bait and switch" security, containing a hodge-podge of "bumper sticker" election-year promises that had little do with either the 9/11 Commission's report or the real homeland security needs of the United States. The draft bill to be introduced in the Senate, however, focuses mostly on practical measures for addressing priority issues.

Hitting the Mark. The draft version of the Senate's Improving America's Security Act of 2007 addresses key areas of homeland security where there is legitimate room for improvement. These include enhancing intelligence and early warning operations among federal, state, and local agencies and strengthening information sharing between the public and private sectors. Many of the provisions of the draft legislation build on the pioneering work done by the Administration in establishing a national intelligence network called the Information Sharing Environment (ISE). Rightly, the legislation places much of the responsibility for implementing the ISE on the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This is consistent with the intent of the Homeland Security Act of 2002, which established the department and directed that DHS serve as the hub for sharing relevant information with the public and private sectors.

S. 4 also places appropriate emphasis on strengthening measures to combat terrorist travel. In particular, it strengthens the Visa Waiver Program, a cooperative initiative of the United States and 27 other nations to permit free, secure travel between them for up to 90 days without visas. The bill requires security enhancements consistent with those already envisioned by the Administration to ensure that the program provides for safe, secure, and convenient travel between the U.S. and its friends and allies.

Missing the Target. The Improving America's Security Act of 2007 is not perfect. It duplicates some of the shortfalls of the House legislation. One shortfall is particularly noteworthy. The Senate bill continues the tendency of the Congress to over-proliferate Homeland Security grants, adding a new grant for interoperable communications and perpetuating inefficient grant programs such as the Assistance to Firefighter Grants. All these grant programs encourage states and localities to view security grants as pork-barrel handouts and recurring entitlements. Priority needs such as enhancing interoperable communications should be funded out of existing homeland security grant programs, displacing wasteful and inefficient efforts that have done little to meet national priorities.

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A Base to Build On. By focusing on key issues, consistent with the national homeland security strategy and the Administration's effort, S. 4 contains initiatives that will help rather than hinder. It should be the starting point for crafting legislation intended to keep America safe, free, and prosperous.

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