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Open Target: Where America is Vulnerable to Terrorist Attack

Even under normal circumstances, managing the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) when it sprang into existence in January 2003 would have been a monumental challenge. The legislation creating it called for the merger of 22 separate organisations and entities, each with a different culture, operating procedure and information system, into one mega-agency charged with the daunting task of defending America's open, dynamic and interconnected society against all manner of potential terrorist attacks.

But early 2003 was no ordinary time. During the autumn congressional election campaign, President George W. Bush had successfully used the debate over creating the department to cast Democrats as weak on national security and he planned to use the new department's success in protecting the American people from terrorism as one of the central themes of his 2004 bid for reelection. Homeland Security was, therefore, a highly politicised agency before it even left the womb.

Enter Clark Kent Ervin – Texas friend of the president, dedicated public servant, and fresh off a stint as the State Department inspector general, where Secretary of State Colin Powell had empowered him to be 'absolutely independent, absolutely vigorous, absolutely objective, and absolutely candid'. The patriotic and idealistic Ervin came to his new job as inspector general of the Department of Homeland Security eager to help prevent another 11 September attack and looked forward to using his authority to make the department a strong, effective agency. He quickly found, however, that his enthusiasm for identifying the agency's shortcomings so they could be quickly remedied was not shared by the hyper-defensive leadership, especially Secretary Tom Ridge. Open Target is the tale of Ervin's disillusionment.

Ervin's modus operandi during his two-year tenure at the department was to dispatch a team of investigators to review a programme, identify serious flaws
that left the United States vulnerable to a terrorist plot, and then expect the department’s leadership to jump into action to fix the problem. He was consistently disappointed.

When Ervin’s team found that airport screeners were failing to find hidden guns and explosives at checkpoints at an alarmingly high rate, Admiral Jim Loy, head of the Transportation Security Agency (TSA), protested that Ervin was ‘needlessly making TSA look bad by emphasizing how often screeners missed concealed weapons instead of how often the caught them’. When Ervin issued a report cataloguing the weaknesses in the programme that allows residents of many European and Asian countries to enter the United States without a visa, Ridge stormed, ‘Why do you keep putting out these damning reports?’ When Ervin put together a set of recommendations to beef up oversight of contracting and procurement to protect against ‘rapacious contractors’, Under Secretary for Management Janet Hale blocked the memo from getting to Ridge because ‘she didn’t want Secretary to know that she hadn’t done anything yet to get a handle on wasteful spending’.

While the inattentiveness, lack of urgency, and emphasis of appearance over substance of these episodes is a theme that runs through his book, the core purpose of Open Target is to make the case that, despite the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and the billions spent on it, four and a half years after 11 September 2001 America remains exceptionally vulnerable to a terrorist attack. In this endeavour, Ervin joins a growing bipartisan list of critics such as former Senator Warren Rudman, who wrote in the Wall Street Journal that his ‘hair was on fire’ out of frustration at how little has been done to protect the homeland; Council of Foreign Relations expert Stephen Flynn, who detailed the dangers of insecure ports in America the Vulnerable; and members of the now disbanded 9/11 Commission, who gave the administration horrible grades for failing to implement security improvements. Readers familiar with the litany of studies, oversight reports and scholarship detailing widespread deficiencies in US domestic security programmes will find little new in Open Target. But both experts and causal readers alike will find the sheer magnitude of the problems Ervin outlines, and the government’s lack of either the will or ability to fix them, to be both disturbing and depressing.

One shortcoming of Ervin’s analysis, common to many works on homeland security, is the failure to provide a sense of perspective and priorities. To Ervin, every security gap – whether at airports, borders or subways – seems to have equal potential for exploitation with equally dire consequences for America. But that is not the case. Prioritisation is essential. Otherwise, as Senator Thad Cochran once warned, the United States could spend the entire federal budget
on just homeland security. Ervin’s demand that every single programmatic flaw he uncovered be immediately remedied fails to acknowledge this reality.

Ervin also fails to recognise that his friend, President Bush, bears much more of the blame for the state of our homeland security than the book’s antagonist, Tom Ridge. After all, it is Bush, not Ridge, who decided to politicise the topic of homeland security, thereby creating the imperative that the department be perceived to be immediately robust and effective even when circumstances made that an impossibility. And it was Bush, not Ridge, who, to placate conservatives, promised that the department could achieve its mission without hiring new federal employees, a promise that has caused many of the programmatic and management difficulties that Ervin identified. And, it was Bush, not Ridge, who placed tax cuts and military spending as higher budget priorities than homeland security.

Although Ervin never laid these criticism directly at the White House doorstep, Open Target is, at its core, a devastating critique of Bush’s domestic security policies. Coming from a Bush loyalist and former administration insider, it is highly credible and will make a substantial contribution to the raging debate about how best to secure the American homeland.

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Europe and the Recognition of New States in Yugoslavia

This is a good short book on the European Community’s recognition of the successor states to the former Yugoslavia in 1991–93. It is particularly timely as in early 2006 the EU imposed unprecedented conditions on the independence referendum in Montenegro planned for May; and of course the question of Kosovo, which seems likely to end in some kind of conditional recognition of its independence, remains unresolved.

This is a carefully structured book, though not one for beginners. Caplan explains what the European policy was and how it developed, steps back for two chapters to consider the theory and practice of the recognition of independent states, and then comes back to look at the practical consequences of the EU’s actions, ending with a consideration of the effectiveness of conditionality in general in international relations and of the effectiveness of ‘conditional recognition’ in particular.