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U.S. security strategy a huge challenge facing next president

By Jane Harman

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It could happen like this, in a fraction of a second:

Imagine hundreds of passengers enduring waves of heat outside Terminal 1 on a busy summer day at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX). They stand in lines that weave down the sidewalk as a minivan approaches the curb, then erupts in an explosion that rips through the crowd and the terminal. An eerie cloud settles over the area. Authorities arrive and determine that the vehicle-borne IED, or improvised explosive device, was packed with cesium-137.

At the same moment, another bomb detonates in New York's Times Square. This time, the device is filled with the radioactive substance americium.

The material used in both "dirty bombs" was easily obtained. Cesium helps to treat cancer. Americium is found in smoke detectors. What's more, cesium causes cell damage. It reduces the ability to flex muscles because of its chemical similarity to potassium. Americium particles lodge in the bones. Long-term cancers may result.

Sadly, such a scenario is not just the stuff of Hollywood movies.

Designing a security strategy to prevent attacks like these is a huge challenge, one which the next president may inherit. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was expected to develop an effective strategy against major threats. But six years after Sept. 11, ongoing, high-profile failures do not

inspire confidence. Border security technology is full of bugs, and Katrina victims continue to suffer in formaldehyde-soaked trailers.

It is doubtful that the Bush administration will leave a comprehensive strategy for homeland security. So, the next president will need to provide one, which should include the following elements:

- Take the offensive against potential threats. Part of this equation is better intelligence - understanding the motivations and capabilities of our enemies, and using that information to anticipate and prevent attacks. For all its tough talk on terrorism, the Bush administration has done a particularly poor job on this front.

- Secure dangerous materials. The ingredients for a dirty bomb can be found in thousands of facilities across the United States - from hospitals to laboratories to water treatment plants - which often have extremely lax security.

Cesium and americium bind chemically to concrete and asphalt and become lodged in cracks on the surface of sidewalks, streets and buildings. Clean-up is nearly impossible. In some cases, demolition is the only practical solution.

- Enhance international relationships and cultivate new ones. Our allies are an extended defensive barrier, and there is much we can learn. Our solid relationship with the British enabled us to disrupt a terror plot to smuggle liquid explosives onto airplanes bound for the United States in 2006.

- Make state and local law enforcement a truly integral part of a homeland security strategy. Federal communication with these partners must improve. Law enforcement stands on America's front lines and can offer valuable perspectives that inform the national intelligence cycle. They know their

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communities best. Programs established through the recently enacted 9/11 act will help facilitate information-sharing and avert needless panic caused by ambiguous "gut feelings." DHS's continued unwillingness to include local first responders meaningfully in preparing intelligence products borders on the irresponsible.

Threats to our nation will not cease anytime soon, and the next president will not have the luxury of time to develop a strategy after taking office. Passengers at LAX, tourists in Times Square and Americans everywhere deserve one now.

REP. JANE HARMAN, D-El Segundo, is chair of the Homeland Security Intelligence Subcommittee. She wrote this article for the Mercury News.

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