



A recipe for even more bureaucracy

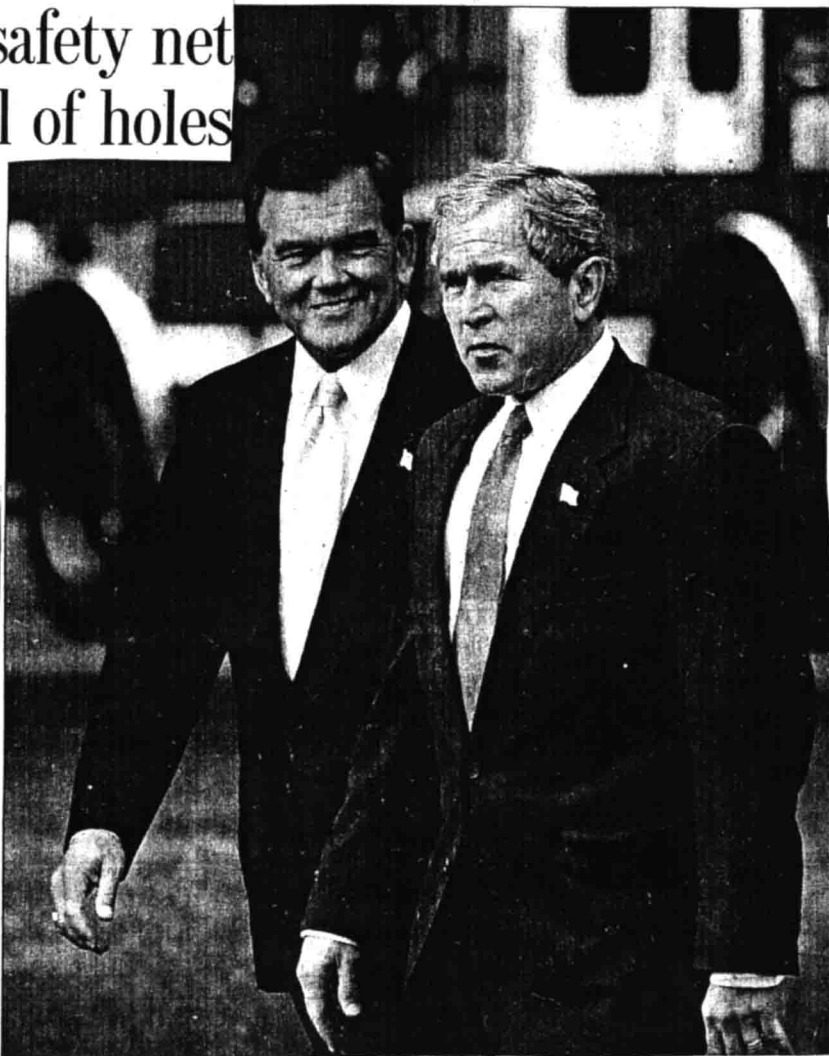
Bioterror safety net may be full of holes

By Marc Siegel

In a growing climate of fear, the federal government is feeling the pressure to try to protect our vulnerabilities. President Bush has just announced a plan for an integrated response team under the direction of the Department of Homeland Security. This plan includes a cooperation network to include our "best scientists" in an anticipated defense against biological and nuclear weaponry. There is also much discussion on how to revamp and modernize the agencies involved, including the bullish FBI. At the same time, the U.S. House of Representatives and now the Senate are legislating billions of dollars to be used in the cause of bioterror defense. But simply allotting massive monies and card-shuffling various agencies does not ensure an impenetrable safety net.

Last fall's response to the anthrax threat was uncoordinated and antiquated.

The FBI and the Army bio-warfare division excluded the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from direct examination of the anthrax letters. This lack of cooperation led to an initial underreaction, which was followed by a costly overreaction, as the CDC put thousands of workers on antibiotics when only 18 cases of anthrax were discovered. At the heart of the problem were the different priorities of the different agencies; with the



President Bush (right) and Tom Ridge, Homeland Security director, will have plenty to say about the development of the Cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security.

AP photo by Ron Edmond

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more powerful FBI intent on controlling criminal evidence, while the timid public-health-minded scientists of the CDC fumbled the secondhand information it received.

The House recently passed a \$4.6 billion bill that arranges for sprucing up CDC facilities and bringing the CDC to the forefront of the bioterror response. Further, the bill addresses the need for a rapid gearing-up of hospitals and laboratories throughout the country in the event of a catastrophe. But even if the overseeing agencies modernize their equipment and change their orientation toward terror, the FBI still is not in the business of public health. And the public-health-oriented scientists of the CDC, no matter how many computer links and sparkling new bioterror labs they get, still are not accustomed to being leaders at a time of crisis.

It is naïve to think that the crucial agencies can change their orientation and expertise overnight.

The House bill provides for a national stockpile of antibiotics and vaccines. These items are perishable and expensive and no biological attack is capable of spreading rapidly through our populace. Stockpiling unnecessarily is a panacea; the country may feel more prepared psychologically, but to the tune of billions of wasted dollars. When hysteria permeates public emotion, as hap-

pened last fall, fear is the true pathogen and no amount of antibiotic or the purchase of gas masks can overcome this fear.

Nuclear radiation, on the other hand, can affect large groups at once. A sudden radioactive blast would leave no one in the streets with real protection—for the heart, the lungs, or the gastrointestinal tract.

Concrete basements may offer 40 percent protection, and lead-lined windowless fallout shelters closer to 100 percent, but the only true protection against nuclear attack is prevention. This gloomy fact doesn't stop the scam artists from making grandiose claims. One of my patients recently circulated an e-mail where a drug company was offering thyroid-protecting iodine pills at a bulk rate—bottle to be opened in the event of a nuclear blast. A panicked public trying to salvage the thyroid, while other more crucial organs remain exposed, is like a naked person wearing a scarf in a snowstorm.

Education combats fear, so the gearing up of knowledgeable experts and agencies is a reasonable first step in the fight against bioterror where actual risks remain low. In contrast, our country's hope in nuclear prevention resides in an meticulous web of detection.

The new authority to oversee our new safety web is set to reside in the hands of the proposed Department of Homeland Security. It is hard to believe that the FBI and other macho agencies that can't possibly change their stripes overnight will submit so easily to this new authority. In the meantime, "the buck stops" with the man who wants to establish the new Cabinet-level department.

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