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America's rail danger

By Charles H. White Jr.

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Congress has at last recognized and moved to fix a gaping breach in America's homeland security: railroad and transit system security. Unfortunately, the Senate and House bills come with veto provocations. The Senate bill enacting much of the 9/11 commission's recommendations has a provision authorizing collective bargaining by aviation security workers. The House bill embraces whistleblower protections for employees involved in security projects. Both bills apparently are nonstarters in the White House's view.

But while these tangential matters raise political issues, al-Qaida is increasing its use of improvised chlorine bombs (chlorine and other hazardous materials move over the U.S. rail system daily in great volumes), and terrorists for some time now have turned to the world's vulnerable rail and transit systems to wreak their havoc. This is simply not the time for a political standoff on nonessential side issues.

The essential issue is the rationality of the government's present transportation security policy - specifically, its degree of support for surface transportation security. America's surface transportation system consists of about 140,000 miles of track in the national freight rail network, 23,000 miles of track used for rail passengers, 7,000 miles of urban rail transit systems, and more than 4 million miles of interstate, national highway and other roads open to the trucking industry. Almost 2 million loads of hazardous materials or chemicals are transported by rail each year. As shown by recent tragic events in London; Madrid, Spain; and Mumbai, India, rail traffic is increasingly the target of choice for organized and careful terrorists.

The Transportation Security Administration states that it fully appreciates the threat posed by an attack using hazardous materials or chemicals moving by rail. Yet the administration's budget request for TSA includes \$5 billion for aviation security and only \$41.4 million for surface transportation security. There are more than 40,000 personnel involved in aviation security and only about 100 TSA employees dedicated to the sprawling surface transportation sector.

The imbalance between aviation and surface transportation has severe consequences. It also raises significant policy issues. If the commitment to aviation security comes out of a relatively finite set of funds available for overall transport security, the surface modes and their shipping and traveling constituencies, not to mention the communities through which they pass, pay the price. The biggest adverse impact has been on the private-sector rail industry, which, unlike truckers (and airlines), builds and maintains its own infrastructure.

The emphasis on aviation security shortchanges surface freight. Detonation of a tank car loaded with chlorine, or any other dangerous chemical moving by rail, in a populated area would have disastrous results. Indeed, al-Qaida

is turning to makeshift chlorine bombs as improvised weapons of mass destruction. Municipalities are attempting to force rerouting of hazardous rail traffic away from highly populated areas. One hopes the House bill, which calls for the development of security plans for the movements of hazardous commodities, will bring a rational approach to the routing issue by introducing a comprehensive hazardous material policy to replace the current scattershot approach.

America's transportation security policy fails to assist the railroads at a level commensurate with their needs, risks and vulnerabilities. The private-sector railroads are responsible for their infrastructures. This is massively expensive. The rail industry is among the most capital-intensive of the nation's industries. Furthermore, enormous traffic increases are predicted for a rail industry approaching or at capacity limits. The infrastructure investment necessary simply to meet this demand leaves little or no financial ability to undertake significant security projects.

Given the terrorists' "discovery" of existing chemicals for bomb materials, the relative ease of access to chemicals in rail transit, and the increasing tempo of attacks on the world's railroads, we need to rethink our overall transportation security policy. Just as the aborted Dubai port deal shifted the public's security concerns from the airlines to the ports, this is the time to focus on the rail industry.

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