

GET INVOLVED

HOMELAND DEFENSE: A CALL TO THE CHURCHES

How America's largest 'network' could
prove essential to national security

by Bob Just

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The most perilous attitude Americans could have right now is overconfidence. There is a good reason the Bush administration continues to urge vigilance, despite our military success. "We have to assume," a senior White House official told the New York Times in December, "that since there were cells prior to September 11th buried in the United States for some time, there might be others. This is the most dangerous fact for American security right now."

Dangerous is right. We should remember also that al-Qaida cells can reproduce – even without Afghanistan. "Tens of thousands of foreign extremists have already learned military and terror skills and moved on," Newsweek recently reported. "Hundreds if not thousands of hard-core militants are still at large, including many who were involved in previous terrorist operations. They know how to raise their own money, even if al-Qaida's funds are blocked, and they have knowledge that can be passed on to other extremists."

But the real danger lies beyond the normal threat of terrorism; it's what the al-Qaida terrorists are morally capable of doing that provides the best reason for Americans to stay focused on homeland defense, no matter what happens militarily in foreign lands.

Already, government organs like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are starting to warn us of dangers that lie ahead. Their response plan for a smallpox attack suggests there is no substitute for civil readiness.

"In the event of a bioterrorism event involving smallpox, the level of threat perceived by the public – whether real or imagined – may be extreme," the November CDC guideline warned.

"A single case of smallpox would be an international health emergency of the highest order," the Washington Post reported. "The CDC plan makes it clear that if an attack occurred in the United States, avoiding mass panic would be a challenge." And biological weapons are only one method these terror cells may use. The list is long, from radiological "dirty bombs" to livestock infestations to attacks on civic institutions, power distribution centers and water supplies.

We know these al-Qaida sleeper agents are fanatical and determined, especially when it comes to killing unsuspecting non-combatants. We also know that as a free and open country, America is vulnerable to attack and needs to be vigilant.

And yet, our openness and the respect our government shows for its people is the very thing that will allow for the development of a massive, independent civil defense network.

President Bush's civil defense vision, delivered only days after the attack, was a call to action. "We will ask state and local officials to create a new modern civil defense service, similar to local volunteer fire departments, to respond to local emergencies when the manpower of governments is stretched thin," he told Congress and the nation. "We will find ways to train and mobilize more volunteers to help when rescue and health emergencies arise."

The president also recognized the need for something beyond emergency volunteers and told Americans he'd created a task force "to develop additional ways people can get directly involved in this war effort, by making our homes and neighborhoods and schools and workplaces safer." The speech was historic for any number of reasons, but the call to civil defense may be one of the true lasting legacies of the Bush administration in its war on terror. For too long we've had an attitude of "let government do it." Perhaps it is time to roll up our sleeves and get involved.

The question is *how*. Not everyone has the time, energy and interest necessary for highly active volunteerism, involving extensive training. Volunteer firefighters, Search and Rescue and the like are the special forces of volunteerism. They are a unique breed. But a system needs to be developed – and it has in Oregon – that would allow massive numbers of regular Americans to contribute to Homeland Defense.

Before I describe the system itself, let me first describe the kind of people we need for a civil defense network capable of maintaining vigilance in local communities – on a continual basis.

We need people who have a vested interest in their communities and are likely to have a good attitude, able to work well with local, state and federal law enforcement agencies. We need people who are somewhat known to their community, and who are already organized in every state, every city and every town. In sum, we need America's churches.

How to rally the churches to the cause and how to build a system around them, responsive to the needs of law enforcement and homeland defense, is another question. The following may provide some answers.

First, let's consider the hard reality of America's present situation, from the point of view of both government and the individual citizen. So far, homeland defense has been mostly a government effort. This puts tremendous pressure on government agencies. Police forces around the country are finding themselves undermanned and overworked, not only because of increased duties, but also because experienced personnel are leaving for higher-paying opportunities resulting from the heightened security environment.

Meanwhile, average citizens – who aren't the volunteer fire-department type – are left with a nagging feeling of helplessness in the midst of what has been called a struggle for the very survival of our civilization. This is not good for civic morale. Passivity is repugnant to Americans by nature. Our culture and our very national character are action oriented – solution oriented. Our political leaders have rightly urged us to reclaim the normal pace of our lives, to travel, and do business just as we always did. Yet, instinctively our American blood cries out to do more.

Understanding this about Americans, President Bush called us to our creativity and can-do aggressiveness in dealing with this emergency. As a free and historically bold people, it is true that we are action-oriented optimists, but we are also realists.

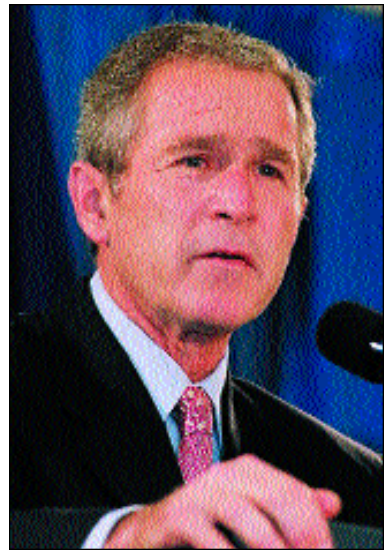


Photo by Greg Schaler/ FEMA News Photo

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We know we are responsible for our own lives and those of our family members. We are also busy at church and in charitable groups from Rotary to the Boy Scouts. So despite our desire to do something, our over-full lives tell us there is not much we can do to help with homeland defense. This is the glass wall local governments will hit in trying to rally regular citizens to volunteer action. But there is a solution. It lies in the manpower of the churches, and in a simple idea developed years ago.

In January of 1994, I sat down with Dan Calvert, then the sheriff of Josephine County, Ore., and pitched an idea to him. The local crime problem, including gangs, was of increasing concern at the time, and there was a continual debate at the county level on how we'd find the money to build up law enforcement enough to protect the community from criminals. Grants Pass, the county seat, had once been designated an "All-America City" and we wanted to keep it that way. Several time-intensive volunteer groups already existed, but I could see that something more was required. We needed a more broad-based method to help law enforcement while keeping costs down, but a method that didn't require much from the individual volunteers.

The solution seemed obvious. Get lots of people involved – giving each one only a limited responsibility – patrolling the community as the eyes and ears of law enforcement. We focused on men first, not only because of their protective instinct, but also because at the time there was a national calling out for men to get more involved with the community. It seemed that all we heard about in the media was "deadbeat dads" and "absent fathers." Groups like Promise Keepers had encouraged Christian men to be more visible, to better fulfill their family, church and community responsibilities. It was in this atmosphere that I, along with two other men, Bill Evensen and Jeff Boone, formed Concerned Fathers Against Crime (C-FAC), beginning patrols in October of 1994.

The system I had presented that first day to Sheriff Calvert was simple. Although independent, C-FAC would report to the sheriff as the highest constitutional law enforcement authority in the county, as well as to the city police. The group would be divided into several teams covering different nights. Each man would be asked to do only a few patrols a year as part of his team cycle. C-FAC acts like a mobile "neighborhood watch" with two-man cars going on patrol, equipped with cell phones, floodlights, scanners and binoculars.

Of course, recruitment was the key to it all. A large number of committed men not only allows for wide coverage, but it also allows the group to function "perpetually." As the group grew and grew, we were able to cover more territory and more days. Although we warned the men that the secret of C-FAC was not getting criminals arrested but rather to simply intimi-

date them into limiting their behavior, arrests did occur on a fairly regular basis. To the shock of everyone, including us, our first bust came within days of our launch. A purse was stolen right out of a pickup truck as one of our patrols watched from an unmarked car (we use our own). The thief took what he wanted, dropped the purse into a dumpster, and casually returned to a nearby bar where he was suddenly arrested by the Grants Pass city police. After that, C-FAC never looked back. The system worked. The arrests mounted up from drunk drivers to hit-and-run drivers, to thieves and vandals to chasing down suspects reported on police scanners to special patrols and stakeouts requested by the sheriff. Year by year, C-FAC made itself useful to the community.

We have been patrolling now for over seven years. Although we are strictly a non-involvement, "eyes-and-ears" group, the results have been impressive. Law enforcement – city, county and state – now sing our praises. In fact, current Sheriff Dave Daniel and Police Chief Ron Schwartz have formally requested that C-FAC help them with homeland defense.

Yet understandably, in the beginning, there were doubts. Even our board of directors was wary in forming the group. No one wanted a bunch of hothead, vigilante types running around the community. No one wanted "wannabee cops." We deliberated on this for some time. Of course there would have to be background checks. We knew that in order for the idea to work, it was essential that we gain the trust not only of law enforcement, but also the community at large, including our political leaders. We never threw our weight around – never went to city or county meetings – never allowed ourselves to be perceived as a "political" force. The C-FAC culture had to be developed with a genuine "helpmate" attitude.

I tell law enforcement personnel whenever I address them in groups that we are not a "watchdog" organization. Once C-FAC starts looking over the shoulders of law enforcement personnel, judging their behavior, we cease to be able to do our job. We had to be an independent, but strictly non-political group. We are more like a bird dog than a watchdog. We point to the quarry; what goes on after that is up to the hunter. Our attitude is, "let the professionals do what they do best." We are here to help.

Aspiring to a "helpmate culture" in C-FAC meant getting men with the right personal attitude. In the end, the solution was very simple. Instead of looking for guys with a lot of time on their hands, we recruited the busiest men we could find. Our men are contractors, school principals, business owners, doctors, lawyers, pastors – men from all walks of life. Some were retired, of course (including retired law enforcement and military), but generally, they were all very active in the community. By design, a large percentage were church-going, family men. As an independent group, membership was by invita-

tion only. Our men recruited guys they knew fairly well to very well. In this way, we maintained C-FAC as an organization of responsible men and not hotheads. The key personality trait we emphasized was being “level-headed.” We wanted men with sober attitudes who could be counted on to keep their wits about them in a moment of stress.

Now is such a moment of stress for America, on the largest scale imaginable, and now is when we need responsible men to stand in the gap and help their country. Not long ago, I was watching the CBS News show “48 Hours” and they were interviewing Lt. Col. Anthony Kern, a retired B-1 Bomber pilot and instructor who finished his years in the Air Force teaching military history at the Air Force Academy. Kern had come to the attention of CBS News by writing an open letter to the American people, which had been passed around on the Internet and caused quite a stir in the military. It was even noticed and quoted by the Department of Defense.

Three days after the attacks, Kern’s shocking message was to warn Americans that this was not only likely to be a long war as President Bush had promised, but that despite our powerful military’s likely success abroad, on the home front the United States could actually be the underdog. The fight in “battlefield United States,” as Tom Ridge calls it, could get very mean, according to Kern, potentially far worse than the 9-11 attacks, and as such it would become a battle of moral commitment. “Our enemies are willing – better said, anxious – to give their lives for their cause,” says Kern. “How committed are we Americans? And for how long?”

Obviously, so far the enemy has underestimated America’s ability and resolve, led by George W. Bush and a bipartisan Congress. The world has watched as the American-led coalition overwhelmed Afghanistan, the so-called “graveyard of empires,” killing Taliban leaders one by one. Still, we dare not underestimate al-Qaida’s hatred and fanatical determination to strike America again. “The terrorists’ directive,” President Bush told Congress last October, “commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans and make no distinctions among military or civilians, including women and children.” We already know that when it comes to tactics, these people are capable of doing anything – including using nuclear weapons if they can get them.

The terrorists want to separate us from our government. They want to sow seeds of frustration, distrust and ultimately anger. They seek to win by demoralizing us. That is why this struggle to which we are called by President Bush is, at its core, first a battle of moral commitment, as Kern says. He calls it a “knife fight” and warns us not to underestimate the moral commitment of our enemies – a quality, he says, considered by Gen. George Patton to outweigh physical strength in battle

five to one. “Unlike Americans who are eager to put this messy time behind us,” writes Kern, “our adversaries have time on their side, and they will use it. They plan to fight a battle of attrition, hoping to drag the battle out until the American public loses its will to fight.”

So far that has not happened, thanks to speedy victories in Afghanistan. But 9-11 has been the only serious domestic test. No one can tell what the psychological impact would be if a radiological bomb or two exploded in the commercial district of a major city. The tone of the media could change quickly, and so could the polls. Right now, the polls indicate huge support, not only for Bush’s prosecution of the foreign war, but also for his tactics here at home. However, maintaining this high morale if things get messy will not be easy. People must have something to do – and do regularly – something that bonds us to our neighbors and connects us more to the government effort.

Something that doesn’t take endless meetings or endless training. Something average busy Americans can commit to without upsetting the delicate balance of their lives. The advantages of the C-FAC approach are many, but among the most important is building a sense of community morale – not just among the volunteers, but also including government personnel, who often feel embattled and unappreciated. In the end, an American citizenry that is actively involved in caring about the burdens of community and government is a citizenry that will maintain its moral commitment.

“This is a different kind of war,” President Bush said last October, “that requires a different type of approach and a different type of mentality.” His emphasis on civil defense was inspired, and his call resounding. It is now for Americans to answer that call, and when it comes to building massive numbers of volunteers – spread all across our great country – that means the churches. Let the churches start the process. Let them lead, and let them invite others in their communities to join them.

Thanks to aggressive action on the part of our executive and legislative branches, we may be spared any further nightmares. But if nightmares come – and come they may – law enforcement should know they have thousands of pre-screened, reliable, levelheaded citizens in every community, ready, willing, and able to help.

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