by Julia Vitullo-Martin
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In the opening frames of the 1989 movie, Working Girl, Melanie Griffith bounces through the canyons of Wall Street--chewing gum and looking gorgeously young and defiant--as Carly Simon sings:

"Let the river run
Let all the dreamers wake the nation
Come, the New Jerusalem."

New York as the new Jerusalem--an old theme, city of hope and destiny. That's what we used to mean. Not city of destruction and death.

New York will only regain its city-of-hope status if guided by strong mayoral leadership and judicious, intelligent policing. The debates over making New York safe again will be both theoretical--what is the right balance of security and liberty--and pragmatically detailed--do these measures make New York safer or just slower?

GUARDING OUR BORDERS

Whether the bomb threats are real or bogus, they are being taken seriously, as are the federal concerns for potential biological or chemical terrorism. Crucial bridges and tunnels, like the inbound Holland and the Brooklyn-Battery, are closed. The 150,000 drivers who normally use those tunnels must now feed through the other crossings. Every open crossing into the city is guarded, and trucks large enough to carry serious bombs are checked closely. Much of Lower Manhattan below Canal Street is shut off to all but official, limited traffic.

The result has been the worst traffic gridlock in memory--not just in New York City proper but miles back into Long Island and New Jersey.

New Yorkers are being amazingly cheerful and tolerant about the traffic delays--even onerous inconvenience can be endured in the short run. But very soon, businesses will have to start calculating costs. Many will close, some will move. Tourism has evaporated. Restaurants, theater, dance, and most forms of entertainment are suffering. If making New York safe also makes it poor, the terrorists will have won.

RE-ENGINEERING THE STREETS

Even before September 11, expensive new buildings were being developed with elaborate security that included street closings. The security plan of the tower to be built above the New York Stock Exchange, for example, had annoyed neighbors by proposing to shut off streets for security checkpoints. By disrupting normal traffic, street closings nearly always hurt restaurants and retail business. But closed streets are becoming an increasingly popular real estate tactic both as a status symbol and a security device--as are the ugly concrete barriers cropping up everywhere.

Which is another cost of re-engineering: sheer ugliness. Besieged Third World capitals look so ominous in part because their security is oppressively obvious--concrete barriers blocking important buildings, rifle-carrying guards, closed streets, even closed neighborhoods. Security experts do not like listening to design experts, but if they don't they will ruin the looks of New York. And as urban planner Peter Salins has often pointed out, in this post-industrial age a city's face is its fortune.

RACIAL PROFILING AND RANDOM SEARCHES

Democratic mayoral candidate Mark Green told the New York Times that he was prepared for random checks of people in public places such as Grand Central Terminal. Rival Fernando Ferrer told the Times he was worried about infringements on civil liberties. "We don't do this by tossing our values out the window," he said. "Look--if we abandon our values, the people behind these attacks will have won." Republican candidate Michael Bloomberg has fewer civil libertarian concerns. He long ago proposed video surveillance in high-crime areas, and suggested that his company's obscenity-censoring software program be installed on city government computers.

Both federal and local police forces are gearing up for random searches and racial profiling--the former, of course, often being a cover for the latter. New York has been through this with African-Americans, and public opinion had pretty much decided that the police had to be very careful. Is New York going to go through this again, but with Arab-Americans? Much will depend on mayoral leadership.

Meanwhile, the mayoral election has been thrown into disarray by Mayor Giuliani's proposals that he be kept on. He recently announced he would give up trying for a third term, but he continues to want a four-month transition--citing public safety. The New York Daily News reported that Giuliani feared that changing mayors now would "affect everything from the

security of New Yorkers to NYPD morale." He argued that because both Ferrer and Green had been critical of the police in the past, they would have trouble gaining the rank-and-file's trust during the coming crisis, which will include American military action. Giuliani pointed out that one challenge for a new mayor will be to establish a trusting relationship with federal officials, including the FBI and military agents involved in the hunt for terrorists. Giuliani is certainly right about the challenge ahead, which makes it incumbent on the candidates to be fully explicit on their ideas about the police department and its leadership. Voters should not let them off the hook.

PUBLIC SAFETY WILL DRIVE PUBLIC POLICY

For better or worse--and a few things will be better--public safety will drive all other issues. Environmentalists have been urging mandatory carpooling for decades as well as rush hour restrictions on single-passenger cars. Now it's here: don't drive alone, says the mayor, if you want to come into Manhattan.

The New York Daily News has urged New Yorkers to regard public transit as a public duty. Environmentalists have long pushed this, but have seldom had so many allies. The News also now supports tolls on the four East River bridges, an old issue that has languished unheeded for years.

Similarly, the plans of New York City Transit to close token booths at 35 subway station entrances and reduce hours at 18 other entrances will surely be affected. As Bruce Schaller pointed out in his September Gotham Gazette column, GothamGazette.com/transportation/ transit officials have been arguing that safety concerns are misplaced. "With an 85 percent decline in major subway felonies since 1995, there is less need for station agents (formerly called token clerks) to oversee turnstile areas," wrote Schaller. "The New York Police Department Transit Bureau reviewed the proposal and offered no objections."

But the argument that is likely to prevail is the Straphangers Campaign's that station agents provide essential eyes and ears at subway entrances, call 911 in an emergency, and deter loiterers and thieves.

SEEING THE ISSUES CLEARLY

The nation has a history of imposing harsh but irrelevant sanctions following terrorist acts. After the Oklahoma City bombing, which was committed by domestic terrorists from Michigan, Congress authorized the Immigration and Naturalization Service to deport immigrants based on

secret evidence. Congress also made it a crime to provide support to any foreign organization designated as a terrorist group by the State Department, even if the support is used only for lawful activities. These measures, pushed through a Congress that sought to look forceful, have serious implications for New York City, a city of immigrants.

Similar legislation--called by Governor Pataki "the toughest laws in the nation to combat terrorism"--has just been passed, without public hearings, in Albany. The legislation creates five new crimes for acts of terror, defined as "intimidation or coercion" of civilians or units of government, and two more crimes for "soliciting or providing support" for terrorism.

In a New York Daily News op-ed, Donna Lieberman and Robert A. Perry of the New York Civil Liberties Union argue that the legislation is largely duplicative of federal law, and sets state and local police in competition with federal security agencies. They are also worried about how enforcement officials will be trained to distinguish between people holding unpopular political views and those supporting acts of terror.

Noting that the legislation might indeed be "overkill," Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver (D-Manhattan), nonetheless argued that "It's important to show the unity of our purpose and not question political motives."

Not questioning political motives is fine, but New Yorkers should be questioning the effectiveness of these measures. Will they make the city safe? Or will they so curtail the city's sense of freedom and movement that its economy--including tourism, theater, dance, and the arts--will be crippled beyond recognition?

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