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New Yorkers' feeling of safety, gradually regained, may have taken a few steps backward. Our uneasiness is not due to a resurgence in crime. While it is true, as the New York Sun reports , that the number of major crimes so far this year, including homicide, is up compared to the same period in 2005 -- a trend that is confirmed by the most recent publicly available New York Police Department statistics (in pdf format) -- it is too early to draw any conclusions from those numbers. The numbers can easily be skewed this early in the year by anomalous spikes in crime, and the period to which the present is being compared -- the beginning of 2005 -- featured unusually low incidence of crime.

False Alarms

New Yorkers have been reminded that no matter how low crime rates drop, or how much safer New York is than places like Columbus, Ohio , there lurks a palpable anxiety about the threat of terrorism.

Over the Presidents Day weekend, an unknown thief broke into the car of a Department of Environmental Protection employee and stole a laptop computer containing maps of the city's water distribution system . Officials initially worried that the maps might fall into the wrong hands and compromise the security of the system; worries about terrorism reportedly were enough to get the police department's Intelligence Division involved in the investigation. By the middle of the week, however, officials seemed comfortable to say that the theft was not terror-related, but rather a run-of-the-mill car break-in.

Then on February 22nd, city officials announced that a West Village man was being treated for a case of inhalation anthrax . The news of a case of anthrax in New York, combined with the images of first responders in biohazard suits was enough to evoke vivid memories of the fall of 2001, when several media outlets received letters laced with anthrax spores and put the city on edge for weeks. As in the situation with the stolen water system maps, officials acted quickly and decisively. Mayor Bloomberg held a press conference on the afternoon of the 22nd (see video of it), flanked by Police Commissioner Ray Kelly and city health officials, to deliver the news and to reassure the city that there was no evidence of terrorism. Officials believe that the infected man, Vado Diomande, a dance choreographer originally from the Ivory Coast, contracted the disease from naturally occurring anthrax spores on several hides he had brought over from Africa for the purpose of making drums. As of this writing, Diomande remained hospitalized undergoing treatment, and no other cases of anthrax have been reported.

Port Problem Reveals Vulnerability

In both of these cases, New Yorkers were able to rely on their own first responders and administrative officials. A Daily News editorial. "City Passes Anthrax Test" ,—summed up the general mood. The editorial praised city officials for being upfront with the public, and noted that "it was nice also to be reassured that the emergency response system was on the case, up to speed and in command." So too have the city's first responders seemed up to the task in other situations where the risk of terrorism seems acute: the visible police presence at landmarks, increased arrests on the city's bridges and tunnels (700 percent, the Post reports, since the September 11th attacks) and, agree with it or not, the policy of conducting random baggage searches of subway passengers in the wake of last summer's bombings in London. New Yorkers might almost have been forgiven for having entertained dreams of self-reliance when it comes to security measures.

Yet the story of the debate over the control of New York Harbor abruptly woke us up. The federal government, with a minimum of publicity ("Congress probably should have been briefed on this matter sooner," said the president's press secretary) and lack of adherence to procedural niceties (a mandatory investigation period was apparently skipped), approved the sale of port operations at six major U.S. ports, from P & O Ports North America, a British company, to Dubai Ports World, a company owned and operated by the government of Dubai (part of the United Arab Emirates). Port Newark, and the New York Cruise Terminal on the West Side are two of the ports that would be affected. Critics immediately raised terror-related concerns, citing security lapses in the company's port in Dubai, as well as the UAE's past terrorist ties. The reaction from politicians inside and outside of New York -- including Senators Hillary Clinton and Charles Schumer, Governor George Pataki, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Representative Peter King (chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, among others -- was swift and uniformly critical. All of the city's major papers issued blistering editorials ("Dubya Jeopardy" said the Post; "Strangers at the Door" warned an Op-Ed in the Times ; "Anybody home?" asked the Daily News). On the 24th, the Port Authority moved to block the sale in court.

Of course, as some have pointed out, Customs and Coast Guard officials would still be responsible for security at the ports , and the Dubai company would inherit the current workforce at the port, which is mainly American. Without

specific complaints about security lapses, the overheated reaction can't help but seem a bit xenophobic.

The real problem exposed by the port scandal is not that an Arab company is going to operate several American port facilities. In a way, this is almost beside the point. Rather, the problem for New York City is two-fold.

First, frighteningly little has been done since September 11th to secure port facilities in light of terrorist threats. Few dispute that the ports are a weakness in the world of homeland security, and experts estimate that only between four and six percent of shipping containers at major ports are inspected.

Second, the debate over Dubai Ports World has brought into sharp relief just how dependent New York City is on federal homeland security efforts. While the city depends on information and money from the feds, the visible manifestation of homeland security in New York City is the police department, the fire department, and other first responders. But no matter what those agencies do, New Yorkers are still dependent on Washington for much more than homeland security money. Given the performance of the Department of Homeland Security in responding to Hurricane Katrina, and the way it has bumbled through the process of approving the port sale, New Yorkers would be right to have their confidence shaken. But those failures also underscore the need for local elected officials to do more than lobby for money. Highlighting the stupidity of giving homeland security money to the Virgin Islands is well and good, but it should not be at the expense of trying to shape larger-scale homeland security policy.

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