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Homeland insecurity

Although Americans need all the confidence they can muster these days, government is doing little to inspire same — at least on the domestic front. While President Bush has defined and is pursuing the military campaign in Afghanistan, Washington's homeland-security performance leaves much to be desired.

For instance, it is possible that lax communication among federal agencies contributed to the deaths of two postal workers and the exposure of others to anthrax. Health officials say the FBI was slow to warn of the potency of the spores found in a letter to Sen. Tom Daschle. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, apparently not alerted to the danger, told the Postal Service there was no need to test facilities or workers. Tom Ridge, Bush's homeland security czar, echoed the reassurances. Then, employees at the post office through which the letter moved got sick. The spores are now termed deadly.

Ridge's overall performance has been tepid so far. As has that of Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson, whose rambling style and missteps in informing the public compound the problems. "We look like we don't have our act together," said a Bush administration source, stating the obvious.

Yes, the learning curve is steep, the U.S. having had little experience with terrorist acts on its own soil. But if — and because — we weren't better prepared, coordinated preparedness is all the more vital now. We must stay ahead of the terrorist mind, taking whatever precautions are necessary. This country certainly has the intelligence resources for that. The perception that rookies are protecting 280 million Americans must end.

The President must set the tone. He can start by dropping his opposition to legislation that would put the Justice Department in charge of airline security. He also must ride herd on homeland security responsibilities. The agencies must level with one another and with the public. Americans want to know: Are we in danger? How can we protect ourselves? What is the government doing?

If we are not informed, we won't be prepared. Or safe.

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