



The Most Dangerous Enemies

Americans living in the shadow of terrorism face two foes only they can conquer—fear and complacency. Today, governments grapple with the threat of international terrorism. Private-sector institutions ponder what they should do to protect their people and property. And ordinary citizens go about their lives with varying degrees of uneasiness in this new era, when an innocent-looking airliner, truck or package could suddenly end their lives.

Both enemies can be spawned by such invisible, constant and uncertain threats. So far, panic has been virtually nonexistent. Even in the worst of times, most Americans have remained relatively calm. That could change at any moment, and government leaders know that. Concern about alarming the public probably is one reason for the vagueness of the color-coded threat-alert warnings.

The federal government, when it raises the threat level, urges citizens to increase their vigilance and report anything suspicious, but our leaders also tell us to proceed with our normal activities, despite the greater danger. This muddled message baffles many people, who grow more confused and frustrated with each new turn of the color wheel. Such messages can prompt dangerous reactions, ranging from panic to complacency, the second enemy.

In response to widespread criticism, the government is seeking to refine its alert system. When the alert level was lowered to yellow, or “elevated,”

after being raised to orange, or “high,” during the last holiday season, Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge indicated that while the threat to most of the country had declined, it remained high for certain cities and elements of critical infrastructure. This effort, while clumsy and far short of what is needed, is evidence that the Bush Administration is struggling to create a more effective, clearer and more specific alert system. Such a system is urgently needed, but a truly effective alert plan would require two elements that are missing: trust that the American people will control their fear and more specific, reliable intelligence.

Meanwhile, the clock is ticking, and time may be working in favor of the terrorists. While the United States spends billions of dollars in an uneven effort to shore up its defenses against terrorism, terrorists simply can wait until the nation’s guard is down before launching a major attack.

President Bush noted in this year’s State of the Union speech that while no terrorist acts have occurred on U.S. soil since 2001, terrorists have struck with deadly effect overseas. The implication was clear: It still could happen here.

“Terrorists continue to plot against America and the civilized world,” Bush said, adding, “by our will and courage, this danger will be defeated.”

Courage can defeat fear, but it will take strong will and constant attention to the continuing danger of terrorism to prevent complacency. ■