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EDITORIAL

Cracking the Homeland Security Monolith

It was inevitable after 9/11 that the bureaucratic urge to stamp “secret” across all manner of useful information would clash with the responsibility of state and local governments to be prepared for terrorist threats. Local police and other first responders have long complained about Washington’s failure to discreetly share intelligence on potential dangers.

The House has moved to put some common sense into the security mystique. Lawmakers approved a measure to force the Department of Homeland Security to produce declassified versions of potential threats to give a heads-up to ground-level responders who lack classified clearance. Overclassification became a danger “elevated to an art form” in the Bush administration, noted the bill’s sponsor, Representative Jane Harman.

The measure is a good first step in rolling back that dark art. An advisory panel of state, local and private-sector experts put information-sharing near the top of their wish list for the new federal homeland secretary. A parallel proposal requires the homeland agency to find a better way of purging the names of innocent people misidentified as terrorists on the federal watch list.

The watch list is near one million and counting, with thousands of false positives a daily commonplace at airports. Public complaints forced homeland officials to proclaim a redress process, but it’s merely voluntary for airlines. It does nothing about the fact that the roll of cleared individuals is not shared by other government agencies — notably by customs and border patrols whose misidentities can be life-shattering. The House measure sponsored by Representative Yvette Clarke mandates the redress list be fully shared by federal, state and local enforcement agencies. The Senate should quickly approve both measures.

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