

On the waterfront: A diversion from the fight against terrorism

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If President Bush were running for reelection, he would probably be opposed to letting an Arab company run six American ports. Most likely he would listen to the advice of his political strategist, Karl Rove, who recently gave candidates his game plan for electoral success: run on national security, and stress that you, unlike your opponent, understand the ruthlessness of terrorists and the gravity of threats before us in the post-9/11 world. Many members of Congress seemed to be mindful of Rove's advice as they blasted away at the Bush administration for allowing Dubai Ports World to manage shipping terminals in the U.S.

In this case, the Bush administration has taken a nuanced view of national security. It argues that long-term security depends on good relations with the Arab world and on the ability to foster alliances in the Middle East. Aware that many U.S. ports are already managed by foreign firms, Bush argued that for the U.S. to oppose the bid by Dubai Ports of the United Arab Emirates would send "a terrible signal to friends around the world that it's OK for a company from one country to manage the port, but not a country that plays by the rules and has got a good track record from another part of the world."

Most security experts say that the critics' concerns are misplaced. The security vulnerabilities at the ports arise not primarily at the management level but at sea level—with the work crews and with the security teams hired to inspect cargo. As it is, only 5 percent of shipments entering the U.S. are inspected to see if they match the description on the manifest. That is a more pressing security risk that Congress could address.

Another is the weak surveillance of goods being loaded into ships bound for the U.S. "We are doing an abysmal job in assisting ports in the developing world in improving security to even minimal acceptable standards," states Kim Petersen, head of a maritime security firm based in Florida (*Washington Post*, February 24). Petersen

points out that since 9/11 the U.S. has spent \$700 million on grants for port security compared to almost \$20 billion for aviation security.

The furor over port management is another case in which the politics of antiterrorism has steered the debate off course. The dramatic fact of Arab ownership gets attention rather than the particulars of terrorist threats and the broader framework of U.S. security.

Terrorism will remain a threat to the U.S. for many years. The Dubai Ports deal reminds us that the fight against terrorism will be waged mainly through unglamorous police work, routine inspections and the daily gathering of intelligence with the help of partners throughout the world—not through dramatic military or ideological encounters. It reminds us too of why the Iraq war is such a tragic diversion from this task.