

# POLITICO

## Spotting a terrorist

By: **David Rittgers**

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A man leaves a sport utility vehicle in New York's Times Square. The vehicle starts to smoke. An alert vendor and police officer call the New York Police Department's bomb squad. The man who left the vehicle is caught on video changing shirts, looking back to see whether anyone is watching him.

This is one of the few cases in which police surveillance cameras earn their keep.

When it comes to deterring crime and terrorism, police on the beat are still the sharpest tool we have. The Times Square plot was foiled by an alert person and a prompt police response — not by a camera.

This is not unexpected.

A U.S. customs agent stopped the would-be millennium bomber at the Canadian border, sensing something "hinky" about him. In a plot similar to the one foiled this past weekend, the bomber's plan was to drive a car full of explosives to Los Angeles International Airport.

The agent's intuition saved lives, while a camera would have failed. Yes, it would have caught the suspect on tape at the border. Other cameras could have filmed his final approach to the terminal. But cameras don't sense "hinky." People do.

This fact is usually left out when government pushes for broader

surveillance systems. Big-city mayors have sold surveillance as a deterrent to both crime and terrorism.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, major cities have greatly expanded the number of surveillance cameras on public streets. New York has at least 3,000, installed at a cost of \$25 million. London has more than

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10,000, at a cost of \$400 million. Washington recently joined the club. But its camera numbers are low in comparison.

Unfortunately, this has not worked as advertised with regard to terrorism.

Cameras did nothing to deter this weekend's attempt in New York. London, the most camera-laden city of the three — perhaps in the world — suffered commuter train and bus bombings on July 7, 2005, which killed 52 people and wounded around 700.

The ever-present surveillance cameras get plenty of footage — but real deterrence is not among their virtues.

The recent suicide bombing on Russian subways highlights the fact that if terrorists are willing to die to deliver their deadly payloads, cameras can do nothing to stop them. Hopefully Washington will not soon face a similar threat.

Surveillance cameras have also offered little deterrence to run-of-the-mill criminal activity. Roughly 80 percent of the crime in London goes unsolved. The boroughs with the highest clearance rates — still a paltry 25 percent — have fewer cameras than average on their streets.

Meanwhile, NYPD solved nearly 60 percent of its 2009 murder cases, down from the year before and a bit below the national average. Chalk this up to police work, not technology.

The New York subway system has more

than 4,000 cameras, but only half are operational. A recent double homicide highlighted this. The killer made his escape at the Christopher Street station, where the cameras that should have given clues to his identity were inoperable.

This is not to say that the devices are useless. Security cameras helped capture

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the assailant in a savage midtown beating barely a month earlier.

Terrorism and crime require both deterrence and response.

It is people who provide effective deterrence.

But cameras aid in the response — helping piece together the plot and track down those responsible.

Both options cost money, and arriving at the right mix of the two is a tough decision in the face of shrinking municipal budgets.

New Yorkers, and everyone else who is told that more cameras equal more security, should know the facts when figuring out the right balance between cops on the beat and eyes in sky.

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