



Homeland Security grants subsidize dystopia

By: Gene Healy - December 10, 2012

"Do I think al Qaeda is going to target Pumpkin Fest? No, but are there fringe groups that want to make a statement? Yes."

That's the police chief of Keene, N.H. (pop. 23,000), justifying his decision to buy a BearCat armored personnel carrier with a federal Department of Homeland Security grant. After all, you never know what could happen at Pumpkin Fest.

In the "protests too much" category, there's this from a PR flack defending the use of DHS funds for a Halloween "zombie apocalypse" demonstration at a swank resort outside San Diego: "This is a very real exercise, this is not some type of big costume party."

Sigh: The things people will say when they're wasting your money.

Both examples are drawn from Sen. Tom Coburn's newly released study "Safety at Any Price: Assessing the Impact of Homeland Security Spending in U.S. Cities," which is funnier than a congressional report has any right to be. (Check page 43 for a cameo by 1980s action-star has-been Steven Seagal, who accompanied a California SWAT team storming a suspected cockfighting ring in two DHS-funded military assault vehicles).

As Coburn describes, the \$7 billion DHS has doled out over the past decade in its Urban Areas Security Initiative program is replete with appalling waste: 13 sno-cone machines for terror-warriors in Michigan, a latrine on wheels for Fort Worth, Texas, and a \$100,000 underwater robot for Columbus, Ohio.

But the media focus on "waste, fraud, and abuse" misses a graver problem with DHS's decade-long spending spree. Sno-cone machines and "zombie apocalypse" parties aren't the worst things DHS is underwriting. We ought to worry more about the proliferation of surveillance cameras, mobile biometric scanners, armored personnel carriers and police drones.

As Coburn's report recounts, with DHS's help, local police departments "are arming themselves with military assets often reserved for war zones." For example, Fargo, N.D., which averages two homicides a year, bought a "new \$256,643 armored truck, complete with a rotating [gun] turret" using homeland security funds."

Closer to home, the Fairfax County Police Department used DHS funds to buy mobile, digital fingerprinting devices for its patrolmen. The Coburn report quotes a police

lieutenant: "Sometimes officers just get a feeling about someone." The scanners can tell you if it's "a housewife, or a businessperson, or if you're really wanted by police."

Governments' war needs often spur technological innovation, and our decade-plus global War on Terror is no exception. The Wall Street Journal reports that dozens of law enforcement agencies across the country are keenly interested in mobile facial- and iris-recognition technology developed for use in Iraq and Afghanistan. It can be used from an officer's iPhone; there's an app for that -- and maybe a DHS grant as well.

Coburn also notes the use of DHS funds for police purchases of "Long Range Acoustic Device" technology "originally developed for use by the military as a nonlethal way to repel adversaries, including Iraqi insurgents or pirates, by making a loud and intense sound that is capable of damaging hearing." In 2009, the San Diego County Sheriff's Department stood ready with its federally subsidized LRAD outside three congressional town hall meetings where protesters were expected.

Coburn deserves great credit for tipping the sacred cow of "Homeland Security." He's demonstrated that our security spending spree has been as wasteful as an earmark orgy.

But it's not the useless projects that are the most disturbing -- it's the ones that can be used to harm Americans' privacy and liberty. As a careful reading of Coburn's report makes clear, the War on Terror has come home, and the "battlefield" is everywhere.