

A Homeland “Security Blanket” for the Defense Industry: The Flawed Nuke Detection Program

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Global Research, March 01, 2010

[Antifascist Calling...](#) 28 February 2010

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

Though production lines at the fear factory are still in overdrive, the Department of Homeland Security’s Domestic Nuclear Detection Office ([DNDO](#)) are scrapping plans for a new generation of “high-tech detectors for screening vehicles and cargo, saying they cost too much and do not work as effectively as security officials once maintained,” [The Washington Post](#) reported.

Nearly two years ago, [Antifascist Calling](#) revealed that when DNDO awarded contracts totaling some \$1.2 billion over five years to defense and security giants [Raytheon](#), [Canberra Industries](#) (a subsidiary of the French nuclear manufacturing titan, the [Areva Group](#)) and [Thermo Scientific](#) for Advanced Spectroscopic Portal (ASP) radiation monitors in 2006, it should have been “reality-check time.”

For the moment at least, it apparently is.

As late as January 2010, despite revelations that the program widely missed the mark, [DNDO](#) officials claimed that the ASP “will enhance current detection capabilities by more clearly identifying the source of detected radiation through spectroscopic isotope identification.”

Notwithstanding persistent flaws and cost overruns dogging the program, the Department of Homeland Security asked for \$41M in its 2011 [budget request](#) “for the procurement and deployment of radiological and nuclear detection systems and equipment to support efforts across the Department.”

Why would they do that? For answers, we’d better consult defense and security powerhouse Raytheon, the project’s prime contractor.

A Homeland “Security Blanket” for the Defense Industry

Clocking-in at [No. 5](#) on Washington Technology’s 2009 “Top 100 List” of Federal Prime Contractors, the company pulled-down some \$5,942,575,316 in defense and security-related contracts from the U.S. Missile Defense Agency, NASA, the armed forces and Department of Homeland Security.

According to [Raytheon](#), “ASP detectors address the threat of radiological dispersal devices, improvised nuclear devices or a nuclear weapon being used by terrorists inside the United States,” therefore “a more discriminating primary screening system—the ASP—is needed.”

Touted as a next-gen “homeland security tool” that would provide Customs and Border

Protection inspectors with the capability to detect illicit nuclear or radiological materials inside containers entering American ports, “with low false alarm rates” to boot, despite hundreds of millions of dollars poured into the program, the ASP performs no better than devices in place today.

As with existent monitors, the ASP was unable to distinguish between components required to manufacture a radiological dirty bomb from natural radiation emitters such as—wait!—kitty litter, ceramics or bananas!

You would think the state would have considered another of the firm’s more dubious highlights before awarding them with a lucrative contract for something as critical as preventing nuclear terrorism. You’d be wrong however!

According to the Project on Government Oversight’s (POGO) Federal Contractor Misconduct Database, Raytheon has the distinction of another [No. 5](#) listing, though I doubt the company will tout this on their web site.

Identified by the government watchdogs as a firm with a history of “misconduct such as contract fraud and environmental, ethics, and labor violations,” since 1995, Raytheon has been cited for some \$479.2M in 20 instances of what POGO has identified as “misconduct.” These include: aircraft maintenance overcharges; contractor kickbacks; defective pricing; False Claims Act violations; improper classification of costs; the violation of SEC rules; TCE contamination at Kansas Airport; an EEOC racial discrimination lawsuit; contamination of Tucson, Arizona’s water supply with TCE and dioxane, “chemical solvents believed to be human carcinogens,” on and on.

Come to think of it, why wouldn’t they be a perfect fit for DHS! As the Center for Investigative Reporting ([CIR](#)) has documented in a series of critical reports, the state’s massive reorganization of the security apparatus under the DHS brand “involved new money—stacks of it.”

According to CIR, “systematic federal efforts to measure the effectiveness of various homeland security programs and grants have been less than a complete success.” And likely to stay that way in this writer’s opinion, judging by DND’s busted ASP program.

Revolving Doors, Greased Wheels

Citing a pressing need for the new gizmos, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Robert Bonner testified before a Senate panel in 2005, and setting the stage for the ASP fiasco, that detection machines first installed in 2000 “had picked up over 10,000 radiation hits in vehicles or cargo shipments entering the country. All proved harmless.”

As security analyst Bruce Schneier [wrote](#) at the time, “It amazes me that 10,000 false alarms—instances where the security system failed—are being touted as proof that the system is working.”

But as a former airline executive famously [told](#) investigative journalist Daniel Hopsicker during his probe into the 9/11 attacks: “Sometimes when things don’t make business sense, its because they do make sense...just in some other way.”

Since completing government “service,” Bonner became a partner in the white shoe law firm Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, specializing in “crisis management” for corporate clients.

Amongst the firm’s more dubious legal “accomplishments” was their representation of the soon-to-be-installed Bush regime during the 2000 Florida recount. On December 12, 2000, the U.S. Supreme Court staged a judicial coup d’état and stopped the Florida vote count, thus handing the presidency to the Bush crime family and setting the stage for the most corrupt, and lawless, period in the nation’s history.

Confirming suspicions that not much has changed since the Obama administration blew into town last year, the president’s Homeland Security Secretary, Janet Napolitano, appointed Bonner to the Homeland Security Advisory Council’s Southwest Border Task Force.

Corroborating the notion that the top political echelons of the secret state are mere jump-off points for a lucrative “post-government” career, and that “homeland security” is a highly-profitable game the whole family can play, CBP’s former head honcho is now a principal partner with [The Sentinel HS Group, LLC](#), a Washington lobby shop.

According to a blurb on Sentinel’s web site, the firm is “committed to assisting government entities in organizing effectively to carry out their homeland security responsibilities, and in designing and implementing effective homeland security strategies, policies, and programs.”

The firm served as the “principal advisor” to the “Boeing Team” that speared the SBlnet contract from DHS. [Federal Computer Week](#) reported in January however, that Napolitano “has ordered a reassessment of the \$8 billion SBlnet virtual border fence program in Arizona after another round of delays in the program, an official confirmed today.”

The only thing that has changed in the years since the ASP boondoggle was launched, is that millions in taxpayer dollars have greased the palms of well-connected defense contractors. In turn, defense behemoth Raytheon has repaid the favor, showering some \$2.2 million dollars on federal candidates in 2008, according to the [Center for Responsive Politics](#), with 55% of the lucre going to “progressive” Democrats.

And 2010 promises to be a banner year for the “best democracy money can buy.” [OpenSecrets.org](#) reveals that as of January 31, the firm has already raised some \$1.5 million, spending 59% of PAC dollars on congressional Democrats.

“I Cheated on the Test? Whaddaya Mean, the Government Gave Me the Answers!”

When DNDO announced the initiative back in 2006, it was trumpeted as one of the cornerstones of the Bush regime’s corporate-friendly homeland security apparatus, to wit, it was sold to Congress as a front-line weapon that would prevent the smuggling of illicit nuclear materials into the heimat.

When the \$1.2 billion contract was awarded, officials claimed each device would cost “only” \$377,000 and would “dramatically” improve vehicle and cargo container screening.

Since those initial cost estimates, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) discovered that securocrats had deceived Congress and that each contraption would probably cost upwards of \$822,000 each, with no demonstrable improvement over machines in use today.

Dialing-down the program, DNDO's acting chief William K. Hagan wrote neocon Senator Joseph I. Lieberman, chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, that the Office will "possibly use the machines only for secondary screening, at no more than about a third of the cost originally planned," Post journalist Robert O'Harrow disclosed.

Hagan wrote that DNDO's decision makes "sense, given the available performance and cost data." In other words, although the ASP has proven to be a colossal failure, let's fund a scaled-down version of the program. Is this a great country, or what!

As I previously [reported](#), GAO investigators revealed in a September 2008 [report](#), that DHS massaged test results and painted a rosy picture of what, for all practical purposes, was a lead balloon.

GAO watchdogs discovered that DNDO "used biased test methods that enhanced the apparent performance" of the machines. Congressional investigators found that dodgy methodology designed to manipulate the results, allowed contractors to adjust the devices after preliminary runs, giving the appearance that ASP's performed better than they actually did. In other words, DNDO project managers handed out virtual Cliff Notes to the contractors during testing. Talk about a rigged game!

In 2009 [testimony](#) before the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight, Committee on Science and Technology, House of Representatives, Gene Aloise, GAO Director of Natural Resources and Environment testified that "DNDO resumed the field testing of ASPs that it initiated in January 2009 but suspended because of serious performance problems. However, the July tests also revealed critical performance deficiencies."

Aloise disclosed that ASPs, like current monitors, "had a high number of false positive alarms for the detection of certain nuclear materials."

Auditors were told by Customs and Border Protection officials that "these false alarms are very disruptive in a port environment because any alarm for this type of nuclear material causes CBP to take enhanced security precautions."

However, despite earlier claims that the machines would "enhance" border security by weeding out nuclear or radiological materials that could be fashioned into IEDs, GAO revealed that DNDO planned "to address these false alarms" by modifying the devices "to make these monitors less sensitive to these nuclear materials and thereby diminishing the ASPs' capability."

Aloise told The Washington Post that "DHS's decision to abandon full-scale deployment of the ASP's is a victory for the U.S taxpayer—a savings of at least \$1.5 billion—and our national security."

"As recent testing has revealed" Aloise said, "the consequences of these machines being deployed nationwide in 2007, as DNDO intended, could have been disastrous."

Fear not dear readers, in Washington's accountability-free zone failure is always generously rewarded.

[Washington Technology](#) reported on Friday, that Raytheon "has won an initial contract from the Air Force worth \$886 million to develop a new element of the Global Positioning System

that will improve the accuracy of information from GPS satellites.”

If the firm’s work for DNDO is any indication of “improved accuracy” we can expect from next-gen GPS, better dust off your compass and learn to navigate by starlight!

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