

# Annals of Homeland Security: Crony Capitalism, Nuclear Terror and the “Advanced Spectroscopic Portal”

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When the Department of Homeland Security announced in 2006 that it awarded contracts totaling some \$1.2 billion over five years to Raytheon, Thermo Electron and Canberra Industries for “Advanced Spectroscopic Portal” (ASP) radiation monitors, it should have been reality-check time.

But Congress being what it is, it wasn’t, and now massive cost overruns plague the project with little to show in way of “deterrence.” As *Global Security Newswire* [reported](#) last May,

*Raytheon and Thermo Electron are both headquartered in Waltham, Mass., in the district represented by Representative Edward Markey (D-Mass.), a senior member of the Homeland Security Committee. Canberra Industries is headquartered in Meriden, Conn., in Lieberman’s state. (Chris Strohm, “US Lawmakers Ask for Audit of Bush Administration Plans to Buy Radiation Detectors,” *Global Security Newswire*, May 16, 2007)*

Can you say congressional grifters well-attuned to the “needs” of their “constituents”—multinational defense firms “keeping America safe”—for their bottom lines? Let’s take a peek at these DHS “winners.”

According to [Washington Technology](#), Raytheon Co. “earned” \$5,170,829,645 in outsourced government contracts and was No. 4 on their “Top 100” list. How did they do it? If we’re to believe *Washington Technology*, by “sticking close to their customers, developing contingency plans and looking for ways to make their customers’ lives easier.”

[Raytheon](#) provides a range of “services” including: “integrated defense systems, intelligence and information systems, missile systems, network centric systems, Raytheon Technical Services Company LLC and space and airborne systems” for the FBI, Navy, Air Force, Defense Department and the General Services Administration. Additionally, the company provides “enhanced information technology solutions and services through the GSA’s Alliant IDIQ contract. The company is specifically providing infrastructure, application services and IT management services to support federal agencies. The 10-year contract is worth \$50 billion, but is on hold as it undergoes further reviews by GSA.”

GSA would be well-advised to take a *very close look* at Raytheon!

[Thermo Electron](#), now Thermo Fisher Scientific, manufactures an array of analytical instruments ranging from biosafety cabinets to radiation measurement and protection systems. According to Thermo’s web site, their Security and Detection Systems division

“offers a full range of security products and services for the detection of nuclear materials, explosives, chemical and biological agents, and radiological protection. Our instruments are a first line of defense for first responders and border control personnel. Also, used in laboratories, nuclear, waste treatment and environmental monitoring.”

Meanwhile, [Canberra Industries'](#) Homeland Security division, is a subsidiary of French nuclear-manufacturing titan, the [Areva Group](#). Canberra claims that its mission is the “Prevention of a terrorist act involving nuclear or radiological weapons... Commitment to maintain constant vigil against those who would conspire to bring such acts of terror to our cities, and the commitment to arm those who protect our borders and ensure our security with the best available technology.”

What has DHS gotten for *our* money as it maintains a “constant vigil” against terrorists threatening the *heimat*?

Sold as a high-tech “homeland security tool” that is able to provide increased capability to detect illicit nuclear or radiological material inside containers entering American ports “with low false alarm rates,” it turns out the newfangled ASPs are no better than what’s currently in place. Indeed, today’s monitors are ill-equipped to distinguish between say, the components for manufacturing a radiological dirty bomb from—wait!—natural radiation emitters such as *kitty litter, ceramics and bananas!*

As originally sold, and bought, by Congress, DHS’ Domestic Nuclear Detection Office (DNDO) said each ASP would cost some \$500,000 each to buy and deploy. But according to [The Washington Post](#),

*Now the nuclear detection office estimates that the total cost for each machine will work out to at least \$778,000. The office said it needs almost \$68 million “for the procurement and deployment” of 87 machines for one portion of the project, according to budget documents. (Robert O’Harrow Jr., “Radiation Monitors to Cost More than DHS Estimated in ‘06,” The Washington Post, Saturday, June 28, 2008; D01)*

A DNDO spokesman told the *Post*,

*“The cost per unit of the Advanced Spectroscopic Portal system has not increased in price. The cost was previously quoted to Congressional staff and the Government Accountability Office as approximately \$377,000,” Knocke said in an e-mail. “Congressional officials were also advised that there was a deployment cost associated with each system that includes a one year maintenance contract. The cost of deployment is approximately \$325,000 and \$400,000 per unit for current generation Radiation Portal Monitors and Advanced Spectroscopic Portal systems, respectively.”*

In other words, Congress was warned—and should have known—that massive cost overruns would be “factored in” to the original contract by these “enterprising” corporate malefactors. Indeed, the ubiquitous “some officials” dotting the Washington landscape like mushrooms after a warm rain, told the *Post* “the cost to buy and deploy the ASPs could climb even higher after the GAO completes an independent assessment this summer.”

How much higher? No one knows for sure.

The project has been repeatedly delayed by technological glitches, management

incompetence, indeed, by questions whether or not the newfangled ASP critters even work, according to GAO auditors.

When the program was first touted by DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff in 2006, GAO watchdogs questioned whether the expense was even worth it, since the “cost-benefit” report submitted to Congress to win approval for deploying some 1,400 of the new devices were more expensive and that ASPs probably didn’t perform “significantly better” than what was already taking up space and gathering dust at American ports.

Additional questions were raised by the veracity of the manufacturer’s claims when the GAO discovered that ASP tests may have been rigged in order to “generate data for Chertoff’s certification decision,” as the *Post* delicately puts it.

The auditors found that the “tests were flawed because manufacturers of the monitors were allowed to conduct ‘dress rehearsals’ and calibrate their machines in anticipation of testing, which auditors said inappropriately enhanced the monitors’ performance.”

But since “failure is not an option” in the administration’s ceaseless drive to “keep America safe,” Chertoff has “delayed” certification since the machines “needed more work.” However, DNDOS is “preparing new tests” and has a goal of “securing certification” from Chertoff “by the beginning of fiscal 2009.”

Congress responded “heroically.” Rather than killing the program outright for its failure to deliver on advertised claims, they “cut \$22.7 million from the program’s requested budget.” Senate appropriators said, “The Committee notes that certification of the Advanced Spectroscopic Portal monitor systems by the Secretary will likely not occur expeditiously enough for quick obligation of the requested funds and has reduced this account accordingly.”

But as with all assertions of “major technological breakthroughs” by corporate con men out to make a buck (remember DARPA’s loony-quest for a “[hafnium bomb](#)”?) raising the specter of “nuclear terrorism,” is a sure bet in Washington especially during an election year. One thing is certain however, the fear factory’s well-heeled army of smooth-talking lobbyists will be ramping-up production lines for a “new and improved” ASP.

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