

Modern Paul Reveres: 9-11 panel right to keep focus on security

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First in an occasional series of editorials on homeland security

They're not backing down.

That's the best way to sum up yesterday's first unofficial meeting of the members of the panel investigating the Sept. 11 attacks. And they are wise to keep pushing Washington. The 9-11 Commission may have published its recommendations last summer, but Americans still face homeland security risks. Here are two problems:

- Congress still hasn't reorganized itself sufficiently. The House recently tried to eliminate confusion about who's keeping America safe by creating a Homeland Security Committee. But the committee doesn't have the House's entire homeland security portfolio. For example, it must compete with the House's transportation committee to ensure airport screeners are doing their work.

The Senate's worse. Its Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee oversees only 30 percent of all homeland security spending and 8 percent of all homeland security personnel. The panel can't make things happen. Congress needs to act like a burr under various agencies to ensure that our ports, airports and other likely terrorist targets are fail-proof.

House Speaker Dennis Hastert and Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist should get on this by consolidating power in these committees by year's end.

- Nukes still could get in the wrong hands. Russian leaders, for example, are quibbling with the United States over who would be liable if an old Russian nuke went off while Russian and U.S. scientists were decommissioning it. The White House should push hard on this one so both sides can get to the real task of neutering nukes.

None of us has forgotten the images of Sept. 11, 2001. But some of us have lost a sense of urgency about keeping the country safe. More power to the 9-11 panel members for keeping Americans focused on our present dangers.