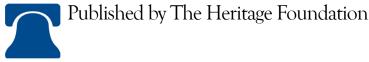# The Current Threat Level:
Ending Color-Coded Terror Alerts

James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., and Jessica Zuckerman

This may be the last holiday season where travelers will hear that "the current threat level is orange." Last week, reports circulated highlighting the intent of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to drop the color-coded threat system. The decision, the result of a review ordered by Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano last year, has been hailed by many as long overdue.

Indeed, The Heritage Foundation has been calling for the reform of the Homeland Security Advisory System (HSAS) since 2004. Scrapping the color-coded terrorist threat system would finally give DHS a chance to start anew and design a risk communication system that would truly be effective.

The Homeland Security Advisory System. Established by Homeland Security Presidential Directive 3 in March 2002, the HSAS was created to facilitate communication and coordination regarding the threat of terrorist attack against the nation. The system was designed to convey the threat level in a simple, straightforward fashion, with blue signifying that the national threat level is low, green guarded, yellow elevated, orange high, and red severe.

In the past eight years, the threat level has changed 17 times. Yet, the threat level has never been lowered to blue or green. Similarly, the threat level has only once been raised to red. This was on August 10, 2006, in response to the U.K. arrest of 24 individuals allegedly plotting to blow up U.S.-bound commercial airliners with liquid explosives. Since then, the national threat level has stayed at yellow, with a threat level of orange for the aviation sector.

A Flawed System. The idea of merging intelligence information with an early warning system was well-founded. The HSAS, however, has been plagued by flaws. The current system offers little in the way of added preparedness and has an enormously high cost.

According to some estimates, every time the national threat level is raised to orange, the federal government incurs an expense of $1 billion per week. Factoring in the additional costs incurred by state and local governments—and the potential economic losses from reductions in consumer confidence, travel, and tourism—only makes the cost of this imperfect system more exorbitant. Yet the current advisory system ratchets up concern throughout the nation regardless of whether the nature of the risk warrants it. Without specific information as to the nature of the threat, states and localities are forced to decide between piling on expensive (and potentially unnecessary) layers of security and doing nothing at all.

The current color-coded threat system also leaves the public at a loss as to how to respond to a change in threat level. While DHS has initiated the Ready.gov program and published the "Citizen

Guidance on the Homeland Security Advisory System," which put forth broad preparedness guidelines, the system does little to tell citizens what can be done and when. Further, each change of the threat level has the potential to increase the apathy of the public to any potential risk and make the HSAS prone to degraded public response.

Creating a Better Warning System. In order to create a truly effective national preparedness and warning system, DHS should:

- *Simplify the threat levels.* The American public is more accustomed to two-tiered warning systems like that of the National Weather Service. Such a system could also be adopted to convey the risk of a terrorist attack against the U.S. as elevated or imminent. DHS should also consider integrating terrorist warning systems with already existing "all-hazard" warning systems.

- *Provide the public with credible, understandable, and actionable information.* Rather than raising the threat level after the recent thwarted terror plot against the D.C. metro system, DHS released an alert explaining to the public what they could do to be prepared and when they could do it. This kind of information is more meaningful than simply declaring the threat level, as it allows individuals to assess the risk and decide what levels of preparedness they need to take to protect themselves and their families.

- *Replace the national alert system with regional alerts.* In August 2004, DHS began to identify specific sectors under threat of a terrorist attack. This change allowed for the HSAS to distinguish risks posed to the aviation, financial, and mass transit sectors, as opposed to threats posed to the nation as a whole. Yet little has been done to specify the location of any given threat. Rather than issuing nationwide threat alerts, DHS should focus on regional alerts. This would allow only those areas determined to be at risk of attack to increase preparedness, saving valuable resources and money throughout the rest of the country.

Decentralizing Homeland Security. DHS should be applauded for making the decision to scrap the flawed HSAS. The right answer is instead to tell Americans what they should do and when they should do it and let them decide how to live their lives.

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