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Americans must be the eyes and ears of homeland security
By Lawrence J. Haas

WASHINGTON – “The price of freedom is eternal vigilance,” Thomas Jefferson once said.

The New York Police Department has now shown us that, to protect ourselves against the rising threat of homegrown terrorism, Americans must exert a far more robust brand of vigilance than we have to date.

The task is more complicated than sending more troops to faraway lands, building fences along our borders, installing cement blocks around our national landmarks, and spending more money. The enemies at home will be harder to identify, their behavior more difficult to predict.

The would-be homegrown terrorists “are not on the law enforcement radar,” the NYPD wrote in its survey of recent terrorist attacks and plots foiled in Europe, Canada, Australia, and the United States. “Most have never been arrested or involved in any kind of legal trouble.”

Consequently, law enforcement officials cannot compile a portrait of a likely terrorist. As New York’s police commissioner Raymond Kelly, wrote in the Preface of this study, most of the individuals studied were unremarkable people with unremarkable lives.

Nevertheless, the NYPD report can be empowering, if we’re smart enough to empower ourselves. The authors explain how someone changes from an “unremarkable” person to a terrorist. We also learn the nature of terrorist planning and activity in Western societies.

That knowledge gives us a roadmap of steps that we should, and should not, take to reduce the threat before us. We learn that while al Qaeda provides the inspiration for Western radicalization and terrorism, it rarely directs the activity itself.

That means we should bolster our efforts to find the terrorist plots that are simmering in homegrown cells, rather than assuming we can remain safe merely by killing terrorist leaders thousands of miles away. While we should always be sensitive about civil liberties, we need more and better intelligence not just in Iraq and Afghanistan but also here at home.

We learn that “the transformation of a Western-based individual to a terrorist is not triggered by oppression, suffering, revenge, or desperation.” That means we should focus less of our attention on trying to alleviate the alleged grievances of those who would do

us harm, whether that involves promoting a change in the direction of U.S. foreign policy or more spending on social programs for certain populations.

We learn that Western-based terrorists almost invariably move through a four-step process of radicalization – from identifying with and adopting jihadist ideology to designating themselves as holy warriors who will undertake terrorist activity to support the jihadist cause.

That means we should attack the communications infrastructure that supports this process. We should pressure Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to shut down the terrorism-promoting Web sites that they host, and we should pressure Saudi Arabia and other nations to stop funding radical madrassas with radical messages in the United States and elsewhere.

We learn that U.S. Muslims are “more resistant” to radical ideology than Europe’s Muslims “but not immune,” as U.S. economic opportunities compete with one’s religious roots and identity.

That means that, as Americans, we should eschew the reflexive criticism to which we often subject our society and understand that, in the battle for hearts and minds, we can be our nation’s best ambassadors.

Most of all, what we learn is that, as Americans, we all have a role to play in protecting ourselves from homegrown terrorism. We cannot subcontract the task to law enforcement.

We must open our eyes and ears a bit wider, and we must become a bit more willing to pass along what we see and hear. The NYPD has outlined for us the four-step process of radicalization. It’s our job to speak up when we see any evidence of the process taking place.