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HazMat Keeps on Truckin'

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Most people don't like to be told what to do. Even if they aren't teenagers being instructed to clean up their rooms. Even if they agree with the goal of a directive, most people prefer to get there in their own time and in their own fashion. Often that works out. At other times, circumstances arise that require a mandate.

The threat of terrorism at home and abroad represents one such urgent situation. And yet, last month, the U.S. Senate again failed to provide the Transportation Security Agency (TSA) in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) with the resources and a mandate to investigate and implement GPS-based tracking systems on board commercial trucks carrying hazardous materials (HAZMAT). The failed effort came in the form of an amendment by New York Democratic Senator Charles Schumer to the 2005 DHS appropriations bill.

Car and truck bombs have long since emerged as terrorist weapons of choice. The Senate's inaction came more than 21 years after bomb-laden vehicles destroyed the U.S. Embassy, a Marine barracks, and a French paratrooper base in Lebanon. More than 11 years after a car bomb at the World Trade Center in New York City killed six and injured thousands. More than nine years after Timothy McVeigh triggered a rental truck filled with an explosive mixture of fuel oil and fertilizer outside the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. More than a year since routine truck and car bombings began against U.S. and allied forces in Iraq.

More than 800,000 shipments of hazardous materials take place in the United States every day, including flammable fuel products, potentially explosive fertilizers, and volatile chemicals -- all of which could turn a hijacked truck into a devastating weapon. Since September 11, 2001, federal law enforcement officials have issued alerts indicating that terrorist organizations may be planning to use motor vehicles transporting HAZMAT in attacks on U.S. facilities.

Lobbying efforts by the American Trucking Associations (ATA) strongly influenced the Senate decision. At one point in the Senate debate, Mississippi Republican Thad Cochran entered into the record a letter from the ATA, cosigned by 34 organizations, that pleaded for rejection of Schumer's proposed amendment. The letter described GPS-based systems as "easily defeated" and expensive. Even after the mandate was removed and the price tag reduced, a majority of senators voted against the amendment.

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Ironically, for years a rapidly growing number of trucking companies have been outfitting their fleets with just the kind of capability that ATA dismisses as an expensive, vulnerable, and cumbersome mandate, primarily because of the increased productivity that results. Over the past 15 years, for example, Qualcomm has installed its commercial communications and position-reporting technology on more than 500,000 commercial vehicles. According to the company, Qualcomm customers include more than 1,500 trucking companies, and 34 of the top 35 truckload fleets.

Qualcomm is far from alone in a crowded marketplace offering similar capabilities. Promotional messages from Mack Trucks' OneCall service assure users: "If Your Truck Is On The Globe, We'll Find It. You are never alone in this world. A truck with a Global Positioning System (GPS) on board puts drivers in touch anywhere, anytime." General Motors' OnStar program says 1.4 million vehicles are equipped with its GPS-based safety and communications system and provides the following level of services in an average month: 500 stolen vehicle locations, 11,000 emergency calls, 18,000 roadside assistance calls, and 353,000 routing calls.

The Defense Transportation Tracking System (DTTS), a centralized facility for monitoring Department of Defense (DoD) transport, monitors more than 47,000 arms, ammunition, and explosive shipments by commercial motor carriers each year in the continental United States. DTTS continuously monitors in-transit status of shipments, providing GPS-derived location reports and coordinating emergency response efforts for accidents and other incidents.

Of course, this is not the first instance of an industry resisting a security mandate. After 9/11, commercial airlines resisted some suggestions for methods of increasing security against terrorists, or argued that the government should pay for these measures. Recently, the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association requested that the TSA suspend the deadline for parts of its new alien flight-training rule that apply to general aviation aircraft. First responders are objecting to TSA's timeline for implementing a National Incident Management System.

The dissenters usually have some credible reasons for not complying with the directive. Privacy. Cost. Bureaucratic burden. Inadequate preparation time. But the unspoken motive often seems to come from just not wanting to be obliged to do something.

It brings to mind the closing stanza of Rudyard Kipling's poem, "The Lesson," composed in the wake of the disastrous Boer War: "We have forty million reasons for failure, but not a single excuse."

Clearly, GPS is not a complete solution for the security needs of the U.S. transportation system. But just as clearly GPS should be a part of that solution. It's past time to make it so.

