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*“American Ports: Arabs Need Not Apply”*

President Bush is right to resist the bipartisan political pandering against the purchase, by a company headquartered in the United Arab Emirates, of rights to operate container terminals in six American ports.

Never was an easier political shot taken. Dubai Ports World, a leading firm in the industry, paid nearly \$7 billion to buy a British competitor that rents container terminals from local port authorities in New York, New Jersey, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Miami and New Orleans.

Pols ranging from Democrat Hillary Clinton to Republican Dennis Hastert denounce the deal as a threat to American national security. The resulting impression among voters – 70% oppose the deal – is something like, “Arab terrorists to take over American ports.”

The impression abroad – which, unlike the port deal, really could affect our national security – differs sharply. It boils down to something like, “Foreigners can run US port terminals, as long as they are not Arab.”

American ports are indeed vulnerable to terrorist threats. But the reasons have little to do with who operates container terminals, and still less to do with Dubai Ports World. Senators know this (or should). Most voters do not. The result is a vicious cycle: political opportunists pounce on the issue, frightening uninformed voters, who in turn pressure Congress to kill the deal.

Only a principled few – notably former President Jimmy Carter and Republican Senators John McCain and John Warner – stand against the tide.

Why are American ports unsafe? Mainly because little has been done since 9/11 to make them safer. Only about one in 20 of the millions of cargo containers that land in US ports each year are inspected manually or by scanners. Most container shippers now agree to verify container contents from the point of manufacture abroad to arrival in the US, but we have little way to confirm their paperwork. Dubai and other cooperative ports overseas send the US ship manifests in advance of departure, and agree to spot checks of any suspect shipments, but only a small percentage of containers are checked.

Retired Coast Guard officer Stephen Flynn and former Coast Guard Commandant James Loy propose that all containers coming into the US be inspected for a modest fee. Already done in a pilot project in Hong Kong, this may be the single best step we could take. But even this is not full-proof: existing scanner and radiation technology can miss, say, enriched uranium.

As Flynn and Loy point out, debate should zero in on these real issues, not on the innuendo against Dubai Ports World. If Americans knew the facts about the Dubai deal, they would be far less alarmed. For example:

- Security in US ports is handled not by terminal operators like Dubai, but by US customs, the Coast Guard and local police.
- Terminal workers at US ports are, and under Dubai's operation will remain, Americans, members of the longshoreman's union.
- Dubai Port World's operations chief is an American. Previously with the American company, Sealand, he has long experience in the industry.
- Pending further review by the US, Dubai Port World has agreed to manage its US operations as a separate business unit, over whose management Dubai would not exercise influence or control.
- Dubai's security chief for US operations will remain an American, unless the Coast Guard agrees otherwise.
- Any foreign Dubai employees who propose to come to the US will require visas, which nowadays are subject to close scrutiny.
- Dubai, a strongly pro-Western country, is a key American ally. American warships are based in Dubai and American warplanes fly out of Dubai, which is strategically located in the Persian Gulf.

Critics note that two of the 9/11 hijackers came from the United Arab Emirates, of which Dubai is a part. Yet Richard Reid, the convicted "shoe bomber," came from Britain, and no one calls for barring the Brits from our terminals.

Dubai Ports World is owned by the government of Dubai. That government's cooperation against terrorism, according to the 9/11 Commission, has been mixed. But that is irrelevant to the ports deal. If someone in Dubai (or anywhere else) wants to plant poison in a container bound for our shores, they can do so regardless of who operates our port terminals (80% of which are already foreign run). Blocking Dubai Ports World from running our terminals will not make us any safer.

On the contrary, it will undermine moderates in the Arab world. The lesson will be that Americans reject Arabs, regardless of their conduct. That, in turn, will further inflame those in the Arab world who already view the US as hopelessly biased against Arabs.

If we want to generate more hostility and terrorism against Americans, killing the Dubai deal is a good way to do it. No doubt it would help the careers of many a politician, but it would be dangerous for our national security.

**Doug Cassel's commentaries are broadcast Wednesdays during the noon hour of the Worldview program on Chicago Public Radio, 91.5 FM. Views expressed are personal views of the author and not necessarily those of Notre Dame Law School, the Center for Civil and Human Rights or Chicago Public Radio.**