Erickson Column: National security involves more than securing borders

Jerry Erickson
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By now you've heard about Hosam Maher Husein Smadi. He's the 19-year-old who was arrested on charges of attempting to blow up a Dallas skyscraper. The plan was uncovered when the F.B.I. became suspicious of Mr. Smadi.

As the N.Y Times reported on October 12, 2009, Mr. Smadi's plan unraveled in 2008:

"But by the spring of 2008, he caught the attention of the F.B.I. by posting incendiary remarks about wanting to kill Americans on Jihadist Web sites. Over the summer, he met with agents posing as members of Al Qaeda and planned to bomb the Fountain Place office building in downtown Dallas, according to an indictment unsealed on Thursday.

His arrest on terrorism charges came after he parked a truck that he had been told was carrying explosives in the building's underground garage, according to court documents."

So, good work on the part of the F.B.I. However, what is also troubling about this case is the fact that Mr. Smadi apparently entered the U.S. on a tourist visa and had overstayed. Specifically, he had come to the United States from Jordan in early 2007 on a six-month tourist visa according to immigration officials. When he entered, he would have been given a date by which he was required to leave the U.S. The fact is that he failed to leave as required. Despite the fact that he overstayed, and that his visa had expired, this didn't set off any type of process or alarm with immigration officials. Unfortunately, the simple fact is that despite the fact that we are more than 8 years post 9/11, the U.S. still doesn't have a system to verify that foreigner travelers have left the U.S. as and when required.

As you can imagine, as the facts surrounding Mr. Smadi's case have been revealed, there is now a rising chorus in Congress for Department of Homeland Security to develop an electronic exit monitoring system. Representative Lamar Smith of Texas, the senior Republican on the House Judiciary Committee, said the Smadi case "points to a real need for an entry and exit system if we are serious about reducing illegal immigration."

Senator Charles E. Schumer, Democrat of New York and chairman of the Judiciary Committee's sub-committee on immigration, said he would try to steer money from the economic stimulus program to build an exit monitoring system.

As all of us have seen when traveling, U.S. security has definitely been stepped up post 9/11. However, it is a huge gap in the entry/exit system that there are no biometric inspections, and/or process or system that would allow officials to monitor when travelers have left the U.S.

Officials have advised that establishing and implementing a monitoring program will be very expensive. Assuming this is the case, if we're going to allow people into the U.S., we must be able to develop a system that effectively tracks when they leave. This is particularly so if the Obama administration is realistic about getting support for an immigration overhaul.

As to the particulars concerning Mr. Smadi, his ability to assimilate into U.S. life after overstaying is not a pretty picture. After he decided he wasn't leaving the U.S. as required, he was able to enroll in a high school, obtain a California identification card, secure employment with separate employers in two states, rent an apartment and a home, and purchase a gun and ammunition. Let's just agree that there were no controls in place to see what Mr. Smadi was up to and leave it at that.

Mr. Smadi's case is a clear reminder that there are people who would like to inflict more damage to the U.S. similar to that of 9/11. Having effective border security is obviously very important in the overall scheme of providing protection from those who would do us harm. However, it's also critical to be able to monitor those who are allowed into the U.S. and then take timely and appropriate steps if they choose to overstay. Congress should immediately take up the issue of electronic monitoring and develop and implement a plan that addresses a problem that should have been dealt with years ago.

Jerry Erickson is the managing partner of Szabo, Zelnick, & Erickson, P.C. (www.szelaw.com), in Woodbridge, Virginia. He is the senior attorney in the firm's Business Immigration Section. He has practiced law for over 20 years and represents clients in numerous complex areas of immigration law. He can be reached at jerickson@szelaw.com or (703) 494-7171.

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