

TOPOFF: Fictional Anti-Terror Exercise becomes the “Real Thing”

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Real alert ties up Topoff 4 exercise

Security - Bomb-sniffing dogs ‘alert’ on a car shortly before the top Homeland Security official is to arrive

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Now, isn't this ironic?

Topoff 4, the gigantic what-if exercise with fictional terrorists detonating a radioactive weapon in downtown Portland, turned into a real-life bomb scare Thursday afternoon. And it wasn't fanatical bad guys, but those sworn to protect and defend, who caused the whole thing.

Just before 1 p.m., as police ran a security sweep before Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff's arrival at the DoubleTree Hotel near Lloyd Center, something about a car in the parking garage sent bomb-sniffing dogs into a frenzy.

 Within minutes, police had unrolled thousands of feet of crime-scene tape and cordoned off several blocks. They also shut down MAX trains in the area, and alerted people inside the Northeast Portland hotel and surrounding buildings that they could leave — although they wouldn't be allowed to return until after the emergency passed.

“I can't tell you we have some kind of terrorist bomb,” said Sgt. Brian Schmautz, a Portland police spokesman, as the city's bomb squad arrived. But he added, “these highly trained dogs wouldn't be going berserk without there being something.”

That something turned out to be the cops and soldiers gathered at the hotel for Topoff. It's likely, police said afterward, that one — or several — of the participants who train with explosives had inadvertently left residue on or in their car.

“The wind's really swirling around in there,” Schmautz said.

By the time authorities had figured out the source, Topoff activities at the hotel — a news briefing and a paper exercise dealing with the aftermath of the mock “dirty bomb” — had been long since canceled. Chertoff had bailed out.

The day won't go down as a complete waste of time for Chertoff. After spending the morning watching health workers screening students for radiation poisoning at David Douglas High School, he appeared a news briefing with Gov. Ted Kulongoski, Mayor Tom Potter and Karin Immergut, Oregon's U.S. Attorney.

Chertoff said federal, state and local officials took 20 months to plan the largest counterterrorism exercise in U.S. history. As for an after-action report showing holes that showed up in responding to the fake catastrophe, he said an executive summary would be available for officials within three months but that a full report is years away — and likely won't include every detail when it's publicly released.

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