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OPINION

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DEMOCRACY: Balancing security needs

It's healthy to debate the balance between the desire for safety and need for freedom.

Both needs are legitimate and neither should predominate.

That debate was illustrated Thursday evening in the auditorium of the Times-Union at a forum sponsored by the Florida Center for Public and International Policy at the University of North Florida.

If you can't feel secure when leaving your house, then privacy becomes a secondary consideration.

Yet, security without any control becomes totalitarianism.

Several issues became clear during the forum.

We need security. The FBI did not have the tools to properly fight terrorism before the Patriot Act, said Michael Folmar, special agent in charge of the Jacksonville FBI office.

An FBI agent covering national security and an agent covering crime were not allowed to communicate, he said. That was a reaction to the abuses when J. Edgar Hoover ran the agency and spied on Americans like the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Folmar asks only that the same tools already used against criminals be provided in the war against terror.

"The threats are real and the potential crimes are catastrophic," he said, referring to a nuclear bomb exploded on American soil.

Too many of the recommendations of the 9/11 commission have been underfunded, leading a bipartisan panel to give the nation poor marks on security, said Nancy Soderberg Bistrong, a retired U.S. ambassador.

We need due process. "I want the oversight," Folmar said.

Ken Hurley of the American Civil Liberties Union quoted U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., who said that even in a time of war there must be procedures followed.

As Hurley said, "Democracy dies behind closed doors."

There is a level of secrecy that is needed when fighting terrorists, because revealing law enforcement techniques only educates them. Yet, the essence of American democracy requires checks and balances.

We must know our enemies. All Muslims are not our enemies; neither are all Arabs. Americans of Arabic descent must not be profiled for no reason.

In fact, Muslim-Americans can help spread the word of American democracy overseas, but only if they can speak with some legitimacy, not if they are being harassed at home.

Parvez Ahmed of the Council on American-Islamic Relations recently conducted seminars for law enforcement agents. He also traveled to the Middle East to speak about building bridges of understanding with America.

Yet when he returned home, he was singled out at an airport and questioned.

Americans must develop more knowledge of world cultures and be able to distinguish our friends from the few dangerous enemies.

And we must continue to debate, struggling to find that balance between security and freedom.

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