As the Homeland Security Department called on Americans to buy duct tape and plastic sheeting to seal windows and doors in the event of a terrorist attack, critics on Wednesday said such precautions would have limited value and likened them to ineffective civil defense measures of the Cold War era.

They also chided the Bush administration for not yet taking more significant actions that, they said, could potentially save many lives if terrorists strike. Those moves would include sending more money to state and local governments for equipment and training needed by fire and police departments that would be the first to respond to a terrorist incident.

Despite such skepticism, the new Homeland Security Department stood by its suggestions, with a spokesman saying the agency hoped all Americans would follow them, including obtaining the duct tape.

For months critics of the administration's efforts on homeland security, particularly Democrats, have argued that while the president has said the right things about the importance of defending the homeland, he has failed to back up that talk with money.

Homeland Security officials earlier this week urged Americans to take a range of steps—including having radios with extra batteries on hand, storing food and supplies and creating safe rooms at home where families could wait out a chemical or biological attack. But critics said such measures as taping windows and doors could not protect against all poisonous gases, nor would they be a defense against radiation.

"Most of the suggestions, I don't believe, are effective at all in really helping to protect anyone from many of these biological and chemical threats," said Harold Schaitberger, general president of the International Association of Fire Fighters.

"I mean, duct tape and plastic?" Schaitberger said. "Where's the good air coming from? How's it going to be recirculated? Beyond the fact that we already know, for nerve gas and other elements,
the plastic is totally ineffective. I think it was done just to give people a sense of `Everything will be OK,' and to give them a sense of confidence."

Former Democratic Sen. Gary Hart of Colorado, who in the late 1990s co-led a special panel that warned of terrorist attacks, sympathized to some extent with administration officials, arguing that they were in a tricky spot.

The administration needed to heighten the public's sense of alertness without doing it so frequently as to cause people to tune out the warnings, he said. Also, after past criticisms that government warnings were confusing because people weren't told what they should do, the administration probably decided to offer concrete advice.

But that's where Hart's sympathy ended. The administration's recommendations would sit better with him, Hart said, if they were accompanied by a list of solid homeland-security accomplishments, such as greatly improved seaport security, training and equipping of the National Guard, and giving local responders access to the terrorist watch list the federal government maintains.

"But they can't say that because they haven't done that," Hart said. "So that's why they're down to duct tape . . . It's almost back to the duck-and-cover days of the nuclear exchange in the '50s, kids ducking under desks," he said, referring to the civil defense rehearsals that were common in schools during the Eisenhower administration.

"We look back on that now and think it was a joke," Hart said. "I think 10 or 20 years from now, we'll look back on the duct tape as a joke." He acknowledged, however, that it was important for people to make an emergency checklist for themselves, including keeping some cash on hand as well as important papers.

Brian Roehrkas, a Homeland Security Department spokesman, said: "We see this information on citizen preparedness as prudent planning. ... Most importantly, this represents the first of what will be a long, sustained, long-term effort to achieve one of our overall goals, to ensure that Americans are as prepared as possible for a terrorist attack."

Most of the advice to Americans came from existing government and non-profit Web sites, such as those of the Federal Emergency Management Administration and the American Red Cross, he said.

Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) was highly critical of the administration's approach.

"Two, three months ago, the administration had the opportunity to commit $2 billion--and they
said it was unaffordable—to additional resources for homeland defense,” Daschle said Wednesday. "Just last month, if you recall, we had an amendment that would have allowed $5 billion to go to more FBI agents, more Customs agents, more infrastructure investment, more protection—and again we were told it was unaffordable. . . . So I hope that the administration will get beyond the duct tape and get to the real, serious issues that we've got to face in making a coordinated effort more of a reality."

Some saw the government’s suggestions as an attempt at governmental handholding at a time when the country faces the possibility of a war with Iraq. Last week the administration raised the nation's terrorist-threat warning level to code orange, or "high," after U.S. intelligence officials picked up information suggesting Al Qaeda might be planning an imminent attack.

Those tensions grew with the broadcast Tuesday of a tape purportedly of Osama bin Laden urging attacks on Americans.

Phil Anderson, a homeland security expert with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, disapproved of the administration's one-size-fits-all instructions. "The government could be a little more specific," he said. "The government could make the American people aware that if you're in a cornfield in Iowa you're probably not in as much risk as me sitting here on K Street in downtown D.C."

But not everyone was critical of the administration. Yossi Draznin, a homeland security expert at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, said the security challenges facing the U.S. in some ways exceed his own nation’s. He added that it was important for the U.S. government to involve the public in protecting itself, as Israel had done with its population.

"You probably want an Israeli guy saying, 'They're doing a lousy job.' This is not the case," he said.

The duct tape advisory made headlines in Israel, Draznin said, and for once turned the tables: A number of Israelis back home placed worried calls to friends and family in the embassy in Washington asking them if they were safe.

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