

A DHS Status Report: Assessing Challenges and Measuring Progress
Senator Joe Lieberman
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I want to welcome Comptroller Walker and Under Secretary Schneider to this important hearing on the Department of Homeland Security in this committee. We hold many hearings regarding specific programs or policies at the Department, but at this one we are going to step back and take the long view of the big picture. Do we have the kind of Department of Homeland Security we sought to create nearly five years ago after 9-11 with the passage of the Homeland Security Act?

First, it is important to remember what brought us here. We did not create the Department of Homeland Security as some academic exercise in governmental reorganization.

Almost six years ago today, the September 11 attacks against the United States by Islamist extremists showed just how vulnerable our nation was to attack by terrorists. The 9-11 plot may

have been formed in the caves of Afghanistan, but it was practiced and carried out for right here in America – right in front of our eyes.

As we learned more in the days and weeks that followed the attacks, it became obvious how ill-prepared our divided government structure was to deal with this stunning and startling new challenge. We simply did not have a single official or a single department focused on coordinating the government agencies that had the responsibility to defend our citizens from threats to their security here at home. As a result, we had failed to adequately recognize or prepare for the terrorist threat against our homeland. We lacked a system to connect the dots that could have forewarned us of the 9-11 attacks. We had no clear place to turn for guidance when the attack occurred or in its immediate aftermath. And had no strong hand to guide us in preventing and preparing for future attacks. In short, the Department of Homeland Security was born of necessity, not of chance or desire.

We knew it would be an arduous and awkward undertaking to forge this new Department of Homeland Security. To do so required uniting more than 22 component agencies into a new whole, while simultaneously creating major new capabilities to address issues such as homeland security information sharing, state and local preparedness and coordination, critical infrastructure protection and R&D for homeland security capabilities. Such an effort is the kind of job that would be daunting to the most seasoned CEO or toughest military commander.

In the face of this massive challenge, there has been tremendous work done by many people to successfully launch the Department of Homeland Security. I want to thank former Secretary Ridge, Secretary Chertoff, and all of the DHS employees for everything they have done to bring this Department into being. We know that many people have worked tirelessly to identify the threats we face, design measures to prevent or protect against them, and put those programs into action.

We are a lot safer than we were on 9/11 but as this report makes clear we have a lot to do before we are as safe as we need to be. Our commitment to homeland security must include an honest examination of what is working, what is not, and what has still not come into being. So I also commend Comptroller Walker and his team at GAO for the tremendous effort they have made – not only in this new comprehensive, unprecedented report but in the dozens of ongoing studies that underlie it – to help the Department “be all that it can” – and must – “be.”

Which brings me to the report itself. The report the Comptroller General is presenting today confirms what many of us have believed. First, that the Department has made important progress establishing programs and procedures that make us safer today. And, second, that there are also serious deficiencies at the Department that require much more attention and resources than they have received to date.

GAO tells us that DHS has made important strides in aviation and maritime security, both absolutely critical homeland security concerns. The report also documents how the Department is beginning to lay critical groundwork to strengthen border security, infrastructure protection and non-aviation modes of transportation security.

But there are clearly serious problem areas remaining as well. Two years after Katrina, it is no surprise that GAO finds weaknesses in the area of emergency preparedness and response. GAO has also documented the difficulties DHS has had in forging a unified department from its many component pieces. This is difficult, unglamorous work but goes to the very core of why we created the Department. If the component agencies of DHS operate as disconnected entities, we will have gained much less than we need to gain in exchange for the effort that creating this Department entailed. That's something we need to get right.

I know that DHS takes issue with some aspects of GAO's methodology and some of its conclusions. That's not surprising given the scope of the report, I can't imagine that there is any perfect way to measure a still evolving department. But I hope we can focus our discussion today on the shared bottom line – where do we need to concentrate our energies and resources to ensure we have the strongest homeland security department possible especially based on recent news from the German terror threat. Whatever the differences of opinions over methodology, there must be no be no difference of opinion about that.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses and, most important, to working with them going forward to strengthen this department.