

The Homeland Security Department's Budget Submission for Fiscal Year 2009
Chairman Joe Lieberman
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(As Prepared for Delivery)

Good afternoon, Mr. Secretary. I'm pleased to welcome you here today for your annual appearance before our Committee to discuss the Department of Homeland Security's budget request – in this case for fiscal year 2009.

The Department will have reached an important milestone at the end of this month. On March 1st, DHS will begin its sixth year of existence. And as we examine your budget request for the coming fiscal year, we should take a moment to assess how the Department is faring five years after it was established and what more we need to do.

The record is mixed. Important measures have been taken to improve aviation and maritime security, to address vulnerabilities at our borders, and to train and equip law enforcement officers, fire fighters, and emergency medical workers – the first responders and first preventers across our country we depend upon at the outset of any disaster. Everyday you and more than 200,000 other employees of DHS across the nation, and in many countries abroad, single mindedly work to keep the American people safe in this post 9-11 world – and for that you have our thanks and our appreciation.

The fact that we have not had another terrorist attack on our homeland since 9/11/2001 is not an accident. DHS has surely helped make that so. We grow safer every day, but the war against Islamic extremism continues and we are not yet safe enough.

The Department still has a way to go before it becomes the well integrated and purposefully driven operation we had envisioned when we created it back in 2002.

We are not as prepared as we should be, for example, for a variety of threats, which if successfully carried out, could inflict damage on our country. I am thinking, for example, of the security of our vast computer systems and databases, which the Department is just beginning to address seriously. I am concerned that we lack adequate plans to prevent and respond to an attack using weapons of mass destruction, especially a nuclear bomb, which is why Senator Collins and I have launched an investigation into that subject. And significant work remains to secure our critical infrastructure and our borders.

An array of management challenges also continues to impede the success of the Department. Morale of the DHS workforce remains at an unacceptably low level. More active supervision is needed of several large, costly procurement projects, such as SBI Net, Deepwater, and the Advanced Spectroscopic Portal program to prevent wasteful and inefficient spending and ensure the taxpayer dollars are spent wisely. The security of many of the Department's own IT systems is inadequate. And the lack of a consolidated headquarters makes many of these challenges that much more difficult to overcome.

Two and a half years after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we are reminded that the Department is still rebuilding its preparedness, response, and recovery capabilities. Improvements required by the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act are beginning to take hold, and FEMA is making progress, but it still has a way to go before it is an agency that can react quickly and effectively not just to an ordinary disaster but also to a catastrophe.

Focused leadership is the key to getting this work done, but adequate funding is an essential element of success. I am, therefore, disappointed that the proposed DHS budget continues to shortchange potential success in key areas.

The most significant deficiency comes in the area of grants for state and local governments. For the fifth consecutive year, the Administration proposes to slash funding for those grants that communities across the country depend on most to pay for their homeland security needs. Without these grants, the nation's first responders cannot capably partner with the federal government to prevent attacks or respond effectively when disaster strikes. The Administration's 2009 budget proposal calls for an overall 48 percent cut to state and local homeland security grants - including a 60 percent cut to firefighters, a 56 percent cut to transit security grants, and a 48 percent reduction to port security grants. Those aren't just budget trimmings. They represent a wholesale attempt to get out of the business of supporting state and local homeland security efforts. With no evidence the threats against have diminished - or that our state and local first preventers and first responders are nearly as prepared as they need to be - I will, as I have in the past, oppose the Administration's proposed cuts to these grant programs and work to restore funding to full levels authorized by last year's 9/11 legislation.

This will be a critical year for the Department of Homeland Security. In November, we will elect a new President, and no matter who is elected, the Department will undergo a transition in leadership. We know from experience that al-Qaeda launches attacks at precisely the moment of greatest vulnerability - and one of those times, in their perception, is during transitions of leadership. That's why the transition next year from one administration to the next must be well planned and well-executed. I know serious efforts are already underway, which we appreciate, and the plans you are now setting in place must be fully and effectively implemented.

Mr. Secretary, you know as well as anybody that the terrorist threat is as serious today as it has been at any time since September 11, 2001. I have heard you talk about what keeps you awake at night - the threat of a WMD attack. The fact is, there is no shortage of possibilities in the ways in which this might happen in our open society. And the challenge of confronting and overcoming these threats can seem overwhelming. The simple fact is you and your employees cannot afford to let down your guard, and we cannot afford to let down our guard. Therefore, we must invest in you, the people who work at the Department, to provide better training and better workplace conditions so that DHS can attract and retain the best and the brightest.

We on this Committee understand the responsibilities you have taken on and appreciate the leadership you provide and hard work you have done. We will continue to work with you as we work to fulfill our oversight responsibilities in ways that strengthen the Department and, more importantly, strengthen the security of every single American. I look forward to your testimony today and a discussion about the work ahead for all of us.