

## **Ranking Member Rand Paul**

### **Opening Statement for HSGAC Hearing: “The FY24 DHS Budget: Resources and Authorities Requested to Protect and Secure the Homeland”**

In 2002, Congress established the Department of Homeland Security in response to the 9/11 attacks to centralize and consolidate homeland security efforts to prevent terrorist attacks. In the 20 years since its creation, the Department of Homeland Security has departed from its original mission and used its expansive authorities and funding to impede on the rights of American citizens.

This is not just my opinion. In November 2022, the ACLU concluded “[t]wenty years later, it’s past time to seriously reconsider DHS. Its abusive practices aren’t just antithetical to our values – they are a waste of taxpayers dollars and a distraction from serious problems facing people in our country.”

What should terrify every American is that the full extent of DHS’s abuse of its power against its own citizens are still largely unknown. The public is only recently learning the degree to which the department’s Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) was employed to surveil and censor American citizens’ social media for what it concluded to be “misinformation” and “disinformation”. What was the result? Statements about COVID-19 that are now supported by evidence were flagged as disinformation. Statements including my own that were once labeled by our government as “disinformation”, such as the efficacy of masks, naturally acquired immunity, and the origins of COVID-19, are now supported by evidence.

In 2021, DHS even put out a video encouraging “children to report their own family members to Facebook for ‘disinformation’ if they challenge US government narratives on Covid-19.” In reality, the most significant source of disinformation during the pandemic, with the most influence and greatest impact on people’s lives, was the US government.

All this was occurring during what was likely the greatest national security threat to our nation in modern day history – a global pandemic that killed millions of Americans. During this time was the Department of Homeland Security working to determine the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic and whether taxpayer funding went to conduct risky research in Chinese labs? No.

Instead of focusing on real threats, DHS was internally strategizing on how it can expand social media censorship of Americans using third-party nonprofits as, in the words of a CISA official, a “clearing house for information to avoid the appearance of government propaganda”.

A report published last month by Brennan Center for Justice found at least 12 overlapping DHS programs for tracking what Americans are saying online. It found that the department's programs have veered from its counterterrorism mission into tracking social and political movements and monitoring First Amendment-protected activity of American citizens. The report concluded that overbroad mandates, flimsy safeguards, and fragmented oversight have allowed overreach and abuses to proliferate across DHS intelligence programs.

This kind of abuse of power should terrify all of us regardless of which side of the aisle you are on. Even worse, it is all taking place while the Department is failing miserably at one of its core responsibilities – securing our border. Congress cannot continue to provide more funding and responsibilities to an agency that so clearly misunderstands its statutory authorities and purpose.