



United States Senate

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman, ID-Conn.

Opening Statement of Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee

“The Future of Homeland Security: The Evolution of the Homeland Security Department’s Roles and Missions” Washington, DC July 12, 2012

Good morning, this is the second in a series of hearings the Committee is holding on the past, present, and future of homeland security in our country, coincident with the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the Homeland Security Act in November of 2002 - obviously after 9/11. As I end my service in the Senate I wanted to take a look at homeland security over the past 10 years, but really more importantly, to look forward, discuss the unfinished business, and to anticipate how we can meet evolving threats. I hope thereby to create a record which will be of help to this committee and its new leadership next year.

We had a very good hearing yesterday with a panel that described the evolving homeland security threat. Today we’re going to focus on the department itself, how it’s done over the almost 10 years now, and what it should be doing in the years ahead.

The Department of Homeland Security doesn’t include all of the federal government’s majority homeland security agencies. The Departments of State, Defense, Justice, and Health and Human Services, along with key intelligence agencies of our government, all play very important roles in protecting our homeland security.

Our state and local partners, as well as the private sector, and as we discussed yesterday, the American people themselves, all have significant responsibilities.

But really, the center of homeland security was intended to be the Department of Homeland Security. It was intended to be not only the center point, but the coordinating point of the agencies that were brought within it and also to make sure that we were interacting with a lot of other agencies of the federal state and local governments that had both responsibility and some opportunity to contribute to our homeland defense.

As I look back, I would say the Department has come an awful long way in its first decade, but this is a mission that has no final destination point. It has to continue getting better, and there are ways to meet the evolving threat. There are ways in the first decade, there were some things that happened that were not as good as we wanted. But as I go back to 10 years ago, I think the vision that Congress had for the Department of Homeland Security when we created it was to have a department that would be more than the sum of its parts. A department that would integrate key homeland security functions such as border preparedness and infrastructure protection in a department that would help ensure, as we said over and over again after 9/11, that we would never again fail to connect the dots so that we would prevent the next 9/11 from happening.

As I've said, I think that the Department has made tremendous strides forward in the nearly ten years since the passage of the Homeland Security Act in achieving some of these broad goals we've talked about and that we had in mind 10 years ago.

Al Qaeda, which we were focused on of course because it claimed credit for 9/11, the attacks against America, and its affiliates have not carried out a successful attack, certainly not one anywhere near the catastrophic dimensions of 9/11, since 9/11 which I think is a credit not only to our offensive forces let by the U.S. military and intelligence communities, but also to the tremendous work the homeland security department has done.

Let me talk about the areas where I think there has been significant progress. We've got a screening system now at points of entry into the U.S. that is integrated with information from the intelligence community and others, and has become very effective at detecting bad actors trying to enter the country.

Our aviation screening system is vastly improved from what we had before 9/11. We now have more robust two-way information sharing on potential threats, not only within the federal government, but with state and local governments, and that's in large measure due to the leadership of DHS and its support for state and local fusion centers. In a different aspect of the DHS responsibilities, our nation's preparedness and response efforts, led by FEMA, have improved significantly in the seven years since Hurricane Katrina, which obviously showed how inadequate FEMA was at that point. Their response to just about every natural disaster that has occurred in our country since then has been significantly better and drawn very positive reviews.

These are important achievements. We shouldn't forget them in the occasional griping from people who don't like to take their shoes off or go through magnetometers or whatever else at airports. But the Department still has a way to go to fully realize what we want it to be.

Let me just mention a few of the areas where I think there is much more to be done. Interestingly, most of these have to do with the administration of the Department, with process if you will. But process is important.

For example, the Department's operational components are still not adequately integrated with its headquarters and with each other, and that causes problems. It causes at least less than optimal use of the Department's resources.

The Department of Homeland Security continues to have workforce morale challenges, as reflected in the annual ratings done in the federal human capital survey. These have improved over the years, but nowhere to the extent needed. The Department of Homeland Security also struggles with setting requirements and effectively carrying them out for major acquisitions and ensuring that these acquisition programs stay on track while they are underway. The Department of Homeland Security is, unfortunately, not unique among federal agencies in this problem, but this is the Department that we helped create and we have oversight responsibility for it. I'll be honest and say their performance in this regard has not been adequate.

In the years ahead, the Department, in a different way, will need to take actions to anticipate and respond to evolving homeland security threats, including continuing to increase its capabilities with respect to cybersecurity in response to cyber attacks on our country.

The greater challenge, of course, is that the Department of Homeland Security, along with every other federal agency, will have to find a way to do this in a period of flat or perhaps, declining budgets. In a budget environment like the one that we are in today, the natural tendency is to focus on preserving and protecting current capabilities. But the risk of doing only that is that we will be under-investing in systems needed to meet evolving and new threats of tomorrow.

I think in a second decade, the Department of Homeland Security will have to be as agile as our enemies. That may mean the Department will have to cut back in some of its now traditional areas of responsibility if they seem less relevant to the threat and take that money and invest it in programs to meet new threats that come along.

The three witnesses that we have, Congresswoman Harman, Admiral Allen and Mr. Skinner are really uniquely prepared by experience and capability to contribute to our discussion and build exactly the type of record I hope this committee will build to hand over to the leadership in the next session. I cannot thank you enough for being with us this morning and I look forward to your testimony.

Senator Collins.