

OPENING STATEMENT
RANKING MEMBER ROB PORTMAN
RESOURCES AND AUTHORITIES NEEDED TO PROTECT AND SECURE THE HOMELAND
MAY 4, 2022

Mr. Secretary, welcome. Thank you for the many contributions your Homeland Security team makes to the safety and security of our country.

Since your last budget submission, there have been persistent reminders of the complex set of threats and challenges our nation faces.

At last year's budget hearing, I noted that we were facing the worst unlawful migration crisis on our border in two decades. In your recently released border plan, you noted that "when the Title 42 public health order is lifted, we anticipate migration levels will increase, as smugglers will seek to take advantage of and profit from vulnerable migrants." You further noted that "a significant increase in migrant encounters will substantially strain our system even farther."

I could not agree with you more as a record 1.7 million people were encountered at the southern border last year even with 50% of them being turned away under Title 42. I have serious doubts that your new plan will prevent the chaos this Administration's policies have cultivated along our border.

There is no plan to replace the tools that were in place during the last administration to address the border crisis, including a robust Remain in Mexico policy and increased detention of questionable asylum seekers. Instead your plan is to provide more resources to move people through the system more quickly. In effect, to make it easier for people to get from the border to the interior of the country.

Decisions to deemphasize internal enforcement, plus your funding request's shift away from detention for removals and detention capacity, and the new asylum rules proposed by the Administration do nothing to deter unlawful migration. Quite the opposite.

This year we also saw stark reminders of the threat that terrorism poses to communities across the country and that more than two decades after 9/11 our borders can still be breached by those who mean us harm.

In this regard, I am concerned that polices and safeguards with one of the closest counterterrorism partnerships we have in the world – with the United Kingdom – didn't prevent a dangerous man who simply lied in his online application in the DHS Visa

Waiver Program from making his way into our country and to small town America – Colleyville, Texas. Thankfully, none of the synagogue members he took hostage were harmed, but that could easily not have been the case.

Additionally, a recent report from the Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General highlighted the potential of other foreign threats. The IG found that in the chaotic evacuation of over 76,000 Afghans, DHS failed to screen the evacuees using DOD tactical information collected from the most dangerous terrorists. The result? DOD’s after-the-fact analysis indicated that at least 50 evacuees with “potentially serious security concerns” were released into the United States.

There is also an assault on our borders by criminal drug trafficking organizations. With the shift of fentanyl production to Mexico, the flow of these dangerous narcotics across our border have profound consequences. According to Customs and Border Protection statistics, fentanyl seizures at the southern border increased 56 percent in March 2022 compared with March 2021 and over 300 percent from March 2020. These numbers don’t tell us how much is actually arriving but we do know that it is translating into broken families, damaged communities, and the loss of lives on a massive scale.

We are also facing constant cyber threats and attacks to our vulnerable critical infrastructure and federal networks. I am concerned that due to our just support of Ukraine against Russia’s illegal invasion, we are at a higher risk than ever of a Russian cyberattack. I appreciate your support of the Cyber Incident Reporting for Critical Infrastructure Act and hope that DHS is working with stakeholders, in industry and in government, today on the complex but critical rulemaking process needed to put this new law to work to safeguard our nation.

Russia also continues to threaten Western democracies through disinformation campaigns. However, I am concerned by the administration’s decision to create a Disinformation Governance Board at DHS. As the author of the bipartisan law that established the Global Engagement Center to combat the evolving threat of foreign propaganda and disinformation abroad, I do not believe the government should turn tools used to assist our allies and counter foreign adversaries onto the American people. Our focus should be on bad actors like Russia and China, not our own citizens.

Mr. Secretary, you have a very full agenda at the Department. Thank you once again for being here to answer our questions but I do want to note that we only today received your responses to our committee’s questions for the record from last year’s budget hearing. I

hope you will commit to answering all of our questions promptly as we discuss these issues today.