



United States Senate
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Chairman Joseph I. Lieberman, ID-Conn.

Opening Statement for Chairman Joseph Lieberman
“Presidential Advice and Senate Consent: The Past, Present, and Future of Policy Czars”
Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
October 22, 2009
As Prepared for Delivery

Welcome to this hearing, which has the title “Presidential Advice and Senate Consent: The Past, Present, and Future of Policy Czars.” The title “czar” has been used more in Washington in recent years than anywhere, anytime since 1917, when Czar Nicholas the Second of Russia came to his unhappy ending. As one of our witnesses this morning will make clear, President Obama is not the first of our national leaders to bring non-cabinet officials into the White House as policy advisors or coordinators, though he has added a number of them. Arguably and interestingly, it was that great populist Andrew Jackson, way back in the nineteenth century, who was the first president to rely on what he would be surprised and puzzled to learn are today called “White House czars.”

The main questions raised in what might be called the current anti-czarist uprising seem to be: First, have presidents of both parties, including President Obama, consolidated power excessively in the White House through the appointment of these officials contrary to at least the spirit of the Constitution, if not our laws, particularly as against the authority of members of the Cabinet and if so, is there anything that Congress can or should do about it. Second, does the growing use of czars in the White House and the administration, this and past ones, frustrate Congress in carrying its constitutional responsibility to oversee the expenditure of the public’s money which we appropriate, and the decisions that are made by the so-called czars with that money. Again, if so, what should we be doing about it?

I also hope our witnesses will help us with the question of definition. Who is deserving of the title of “czar?” Is it only people in the White House, or coordinators of policy, whether or not the positions are authorized in statute and they are confirmed by the Senate? Or does it include a larger group of public officials—statutorily authorized or not, confirmed by the Senate or not, working out of the White House, or not? Finally I cannot resist saying with all respect to the aforementioned Nicholas II and his esteemed predecessors, I will ask our witnesses if there isn’t some more American title that we can use instead of “czar” to describe these government employees. The term “czar” seems to me not only ethnically inappropriate, but the federal officials to whom it has been applied have far less autocratic power than the Russian czars did, which may explain why, though some of the current crop of White House czars have been subjected to harsh media criticism, their time in office is unlikely to end as violently as that of Nicholas II.

I’m sure many people here will remember the moment in the classic story “Fiddler on the Roof” when one of the citizens of Anatevka, Russia asks the local rabbi, “Rabbi, is there a prayer for the czar?” And the local rabbi answers, “Yes, my son, there is—it is, God bless and keep the czar, far away from us.” May I paraphrase that prayer this morning and ask that God bless and keep the title of czar, forevermore away from the American government. I’m going to try and do my best not to use the word “czar” in this regard again. I’m going to call the

Drug Czar the National Anti-Drug Policy Coordinator, the environmental Czar the National Environmental Advisor, and the Pay Czar, well today he probably should be called the National Pay Master. Regardless of what one calls them, the proliferation of these positions really does raise serious questions that go right to the heart of the allocation of power in our constitution between the president and congress. The authority and responsibility of congress to oversee the expenditure of the money we appropriate to the executive and of course the right of the executive to executive privilege, which is inherent in the presidency. We have an excellent panel of witnesses with us this morning who can help us answer these questions, and then ultimately help us decide whether we wish to propose a corrective legislation.