

PRESS STATEMENT

Hearing on "Responding to Homeland Threats: Is Our Government Organized for the Challenge?"

**Opening Statement of Chairman Joe Lieberman
Senate Governmental Affairs Committee**

Friday, September 21, 2001

This morning, this Committee will be considering the question of whether the Federal Government, and specifically the Executive Branch, is adequately organized to meet threats to the security of the American homeland. Today's hearing complements the series of hearings that the Committee has been conducting on protection of the nation's critical infrastructure. It is also, of course, a response to the terrible attacks on American that occurred on September 11.

My personal response to those attacks has probably been like the response of most other Americans and most other members of Congress. I have gone from shock to anger to remorse to determination that we must together do everything we can to make as certain as possible that nothing like what happened on September 11 happens again.

The nature, scale, and motivation of the attacks were unprecedented, and so must be our response.

This Governmental Affairs Committee is primarily an oversight committee. What we must attempt to understand is how this violation of our nation was possible. In particular, we must ask the difficult question of whether the government did enough to protect our citizens. With the horrifying images of devastation at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania still fresh in our minds, the answer to that question must, sadly, be "no." The purpose of these hearings, in one sense, is to make sure that we never have to give that answer to that kind of question again.

After the attacks had occurred, the government did all that was humanly possible to respond. We owe a debt of gratitude to the firefighters and police whose courageous efforts saved countless lives, at the cost of so many of their own; to the EMT personnel and doctors and nurses who administered aid to the injured and dying; to the public servants who manned the crisis support machinery at all levels of government -- managing priorities, handling logistics, and making key services of relief and rescue available; to members of the military who deployed to guard against further loss of life; and, to elected leaders who brought a sense of hope, unity, and purpose to a nation stunned by tragedy, including the most recent the magnificent statement of American principles and purpose that President Bush delivered to the Congress, to the nation, and indeed to the world last night..

Our primary purpose this morning is not to assign blame. It is to prevent future attacks.

Even before last week's tragic attacks, we had important warnings that our government was not as well prepared to meet these new threats to our American homeland as it should have been.

For that we can thank the dedicated efforts of at least two important

commissions that recently looked at this issue – the U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, also known as the Hart-Rudman Commission, and the Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction, referred to as the Gilmore Commission – which have identified serious deficiencies in our nation's efforts to prepare for, respond to, and prevent terrorist acts.

And I'm proud to say that we can also thank our own General Accounting Office, whose oversight Committee this is, and whose Comptroller General, David Walker, will testify this morning. GAO has given us repeated warnings that are relevant to our agenda this morning.

The chief members of the panels I referred to are with us today, Senator Hart, Senator Rudman, Governor Gilmore, and Ambassador Bremer. I should note that Ambassador Bremer is the former chair of another commission, the National Commission on Terrorism, that in some respects laid the foundation for the work of that has followed.

Though they differed in their approach and recommendations, I do see agreement between the Hart-Rudman and Gilmore commissions on three key points: First, they concluded that there was a growing threat of homeland attacks; second, that the nation lacked a clear strategy to prevent and protect against these threats; and last, that responsibility for homeland security was spread among too many agencies without sufficient coordination.

In fact, current responsibility for addressing terrorism and other homeland threats is diffused throughout all levels of government – local, state, and federal. At the federal level, coordination, operational planning, and implementation are divided and subdivided among at least 40 agencies, bureaus, and offices, which spend over \$11 billion a year.

Both commissions criticized this state of organization and offered recommendations to improve homeland security.

The Hart-Rudman Commission proposes the establishment of a National Homeland Security Agency, an independent agency whose director would be a member of the President's cabinet. The agency would be responsible for coordinating an array of federal activities relating to homeland security. FEMA, the Coast Guard, the Customs Service, the Border Patrol, and other relevant entities would be transferred to the new organization, which would be functionally organized around prevention, protection of critical infrastructure, and emergency preparedness and response.

The Gilmore Commission went in a different direction, recommending the creation of a National Office for Combatting Terrorism. This new White House office would report directly to the President and would be responsible for formulating anti-terrorism strategy. It would also coordinate terrorism policy and have some influence over national budget allocations for anti-terrorism activities.

I must say that I come to this hearing favoring the Hart-Rudman approach. But I want to hear from all sides in this important discussion. I favor the Hart-Rudman approach because it seems to me that creating a homeland security agency has special merit. If you want to get a job done, there is no substitute for having an organization with line, as opposed to advisory, authority and a budget of its own. In such a context, real people are responsible – and accountable – for making decisions and taking the necessary and appropriate action. Within an executive agency, all the policy, budget, and programmatic activities can be integrated and focused toward

very specific programs and goals.

Last night, a funny and good thing happened on the way to this hearing about a national homeland security agency – President Bush endorsed such an idea, and going beyond that, by executive order, created this agency with Governor Ridge of Pennsylvania as its designated head, with cabinet status. This morning, it is not clear exactly what the contours, makeup, and powers of the agency will be. I certainly look forward to having this Committee meet with Governor Ridge and others in the Administration to discuss this proposal. But I feel very strongly, though I greet President Bush's action last night as a welcome and significant first step toward greater homeland protection, that Congress needs to pass a law, after deliberate consideration, to make this homeland security agency permanent, because it is clear that we crossed a bridge on September 11. In a way that has not been true for most of our history, for the future as far as we can see, we will have to be prepared to protect the American people as they live and work in the fifty United States.

In the history of America's government, major organizational changes have occurred during times of crisis. General Marshal transformed what was a small peacetime Army in 1939 into the planet's most powerful military force by 1945, helping to bring victory in World War II. President Truman's realignment of our national security infrastructure in 1947 helped us successfully prosecute the Cold War. And more recently, the sweeping defense reorganization mandated by the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 was an essential factor in helping us win the Gulf War just five years later.

Similarly, bold organizational change is demanded of us now, given the events of September 11, 2000. This Committee can lead the Congress to that change; I hope and believe that we will.

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