

SENATOR JOSEPH LIEBERMAN

OPENING STATEMENT

Joint Oversight Hearing DOE's Implementation of Provisions of the DOD Authorization Act
October 19, 1999

Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

I was thinking as I was coming here, there is one sense in which I suppose we should all be encouraged. It is rare in my experience in the Senate that a subject so arcane as the organization of part of one of our departments would draw two committees and this crowd to this great hearing room. I know that it is the controversy surrounding what has happened with the proposal that passed the Senate that brought us here. But the truth is that we are dealing with some truly significant issues. They are significant to our nation's national security, to our health and safety.

Like my colleagues here today, I have been upset by the repeated revelations we have seen over the past several months about the state of security at our nation's weapons labs. The Cox Report, our extensive hearings in the Governmental Affairs Committee on the Wen Ho Lee case, and Senator Rudman's report for the PFIAB certainly convince me that fundamental change is critically needed at the labs if we are to protect the nation's investment in these critical nuclear systems.

For that reason, I have supported legislation reorganizing the nation's weapons labs. But as many of us said at a similar hearing we held a few months ago, and when we considered the subject on the floor of the Senate, it is important that we achieve the reorganization in a manner that not only protects our national security, but the excellence of our science, the environment around these facilities, and the health and safety of those who work at and live near the nuclear laboratories.

I believe that we achieved the appropriate balance in the consensus bill, the bipartisan bill that overwhelmingly passed the Senate as part of the intelligence authorization bill. I am less convinced with respect to the version that was attached to the DOD authorization bill. But it passed. And the law is the law. And we all must accept that and live by it until and unless it is changed.

I am glad Secretary Richardson is here before us for a number of reasons. First, he has worked extremely hard, I think, to try to address and respond to, in a constructive way, the security, intelligence and counterintelligence problems with the weapons laboratories. I understand many of the concerns that he and the President have expressed about the version of the reorganization plan contained in the DOD bill. And the Secretary is certainly entitled to make his case in that regard, as I would guess he might this afternoon, and I am sure members of the committee will give him a fair hearing on that.

I also, of course, understand the concerns of many of my colleagues in the Senate, and I see how they could interpret the President's signing statement as raising questions about intent, of how and when the administration does plan to implement the new law. But as Senator Bingaman said, given that the main provisions we are focused on here, which is the creation of the National Nuclear Security Administration, do not take effect until March of next year, I do not think we are at a crisis stage where the law is directly being ignored and violated.

I think that today's hearing can be a constructive one because it will give Secretary Richardson the opportunity, I hope, to clarify for us the administration's intent regarding implementing the reorganization bill. And I repeat again what I said a few moments ago. No matter what we may feel about it, the law is the law. And come next March, the whole law will be the law. And I hope and believe that it will be implemented and enforced.

I look forward to the Secretary's comments, and I thank the chair.