

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Fred Thompson
“Federal Efforts to Coordinate and Prepare the U.S. for Bioterrorism: Are They Ready?”

Wednesday, October 17, 2001

Good morning. I thank Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson for being here today. It's a delicate balance he and others have to walk in telling the American people the truth about the dangers we are facing today and I look forward to hearing from him this morning.

Last Friday we held a hearing to discuss the structure of the new Homeland Security Office in the Administration. Today, we look a little closer at some of the more specific challenges which the Director of that new office will face with regard to biological and chemical attacks.

Concerns about these issues are not new. Two months ago the International Security, Proliferation, and Federal Services Subcommittee held a hearing to discuss our level of preparedness for a biological attack. There have been over ten different hearings held in Congress this year on the biological and chemical threat and the federal government's response capabilities. Moreover, in the *Government at the Brink* report I released earlier this year I noted that combating terrorism was an area of potential overlap and fragmentation, issues I believe we will be discussing more today.

While these concerns may not be new, there is a new sense of urgency. There have been anthrax attacks now in three states as well as here in Washington. Our Committee office was shut down yesterday and again today because of its proximity to Sen. Daschle's office and our staff had to undergo testing. Mr. Chairman, your own personal office was shut down. Clearly we no longer have the luxury of time to deal with the bioterrorism threat and our government's response. The challenge we have before us now is to determine how we can, at the federal level, best prepare our country for chemical and biological attacks.

As a nation, we do have certain priorities in this effort. First, ensuring that local officials are prepared for an attack. Especially in dealing with a biological attack, the first responders on the front line will be local medical personnel and community public health officials. How well trained and ready they are will be the biggest factor in our success or failure in dealing with biological and chemical attacks. Second, the federal government must provide proper support to local first responders

in the event of an attack. That support could come in the form of response teams, pharmaceutical supplies, law enforcement as well as other efforts. And third, the federal government can continue to provide research to aid in surveillance, detection and treatment for biological and chemical attacks.

The good news is that there are many federal agencies working on all of these issues. The bad news is that there are many federal agencies working on all of these issues. As GAO recently stated in a report, “coordination of federal terrorism research, preparedness, and response programs is fragmented...several different agencies are responsible for various coordination functions, which limits accountability and hinders unity of effort.”

This is not just true in this arena. It’s endemic of government and we seem to follow a pattern of overlap and duplication throughout government. In my *Government at the Brink* report released this spring, we listed problem upon problem illustrating overlap and duplication. For example, training for local police, firefighters, doctors, emergency room personnel and public health officials is offered by multiple agencies. We seem to have ignored clear and present dangers. We’ve been holding hearings, following the release of reports, and adding programs upon programs to the mix, later consolidating, and resulting in the same pattern again and again.

Other problems exist. The federal government tends to spend most of its resources at the federal level, rather than on the front lines. As one of our witnesses today, Dr. Amy Smithson, noted in her book on this subject, just 3.7 percent or \$315 million of the overall \$8.4 billion counterterrorism budget in 2000 went to the front lines in the form of training, equipment grants, and planning assistance. Quote, “Bluntly put, an absurdly small slice of the funding pie has made it beyond the beltway.” We are spending a great deal of money on this problem and we will need to make sure it’s spent effectively.

Also, the large number of Congressional committees asserting jurisdiction in this area has resulted in several different agencies receiving authorization for activities that overlap.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today. I hope that we can discuss not only what problems may exist with regard to coordination and fragmentation in our fight against biological and chemical terrorism, but also ways we can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the federal response to such attacks.