

Executive Memorandum

No. 923
April 15, 2004



Published by The Heritage Foundation

The Homeland Security Authorization Bill: Streamlining the Budget Process

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In January, the fledgling House Select Committee on Homeland Security announced that it would pen an authorization bill for the disparate programs consolidated under the new Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the plethora of fresh initiatives undertaken by the DHS. This is an important effort. Currently, congressional oversight of the department is piecemeal. A well-crafted oversight bill could offer more coherent statutory supervision of the DHS, as well as an opportunity to reconsider the entire authorization process for national security spending.

A Conceptual Approach. The war on terrorism will be a protracted conflict, and homeland security needs a department structured to produce effective policies and programs for the long term. Thus, the authorization bill should focus on oversight of personnel issues, critical mission areas, research and development programs, and information technology (IT) investments that will serve as the foundation for the department's success.

Education and Training. One of the greatest challenges in building a homeland security system is developing leaders with the right skills and attributes. The national homeland security strategy provides a clear mandate for the DHS to develop a national training program in homeland security. Authorization legislation should require the depart-

ment to publish a training strategy, report on the status of its programs, and evaluate how to use training to measure both national preparedness and the effectiveness of readiness programs at all levels of government.

Unity of Effort for Key Strategic Missions. The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 requires agencies to prepare annual performance plans that describe and measure progress toward quantifiable goals. In the maritime domain, the Coast Guard, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection, and the Transportation Security Agency have significant responsibilities. The authorization bill should require the DHS to link the performance measures of these three subordinate agencies to ensure creation of a comprehensive maritime security regime. The DHS could link similar areas that cut across multiple DHS agencies to gain the efficiencies of combining agencies under a single department.

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- Congress should write a homeland security authorization bill that strengthens statutory oversight of key personnel programs, critical missions, major research programs, and IT investments.
 - Creating permanent House and Senate oversight committees would improve the homeland security authorization process.
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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/homelanddefense/em923.cfm

Produced by the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute
for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation,
214 Massachusetts Ave., NE, Washington, D.C. 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 heritage.org

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Oversight of BioWatch and Other Acquisition Initiatives. The national homeland security strategy directs that developing technologies to respond to the threat of weapons of mass destruction be an important part of the DHS mission. Within DHS, the new Science and Technology Directorate directs these technology initiatives while also managing BioWatch—a national early warning system for detecting biological agents, primarily through routine air sampling in major urban areas.

However, this could be a bad precedent. The directorate needs to focus on its primary mission of developing and acquiring new technologies, not on managing operational programs. The authorization bill should require the DHS to develop a plan to transform BioWatch into a DHS organization with an operational mission, like FEMA. This plan could also serve as model for transitioning other DHS technology initiatives as they become operational.

Tracking Chimera. The Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002 requires the integration of all data systems related to visa issuance and monitoring into Chimera, an interoperable, interagency computer-based data management system. The law assigns the DHS primary responsibility for developing an overarching information architecture to share immigration and intelligence data and calls for creation of an eight-member commission to oversee Chimera.

The authorization bill should require the DHS to report on its progress. In fact, Congress needs to monitor all of the department's key IT initiatives more proactively. Historically, federal IT programs suffer from ballooning costs and poor performance unless they are well-structured and expertly managed by senior leaders.

Rethinking the Oversight of National Security. When writing the homeland security authorization bill, Congress should reconsider the reauthorization process for the full scope of critical national security programs. Under current law, Congress must pass a Department of Defense (DOD) authorization bill every year. Historically, this has been appropriate because national security was focused solely on defeating America's enemies overseas. However, September 11 made it abundantly clear that security at home is equally vital. The magnitude of these dual

challenges underscores the need for Congress to pay equal attention to both missions. Homeland security is simply too important to be pushed to the legislative sidelines for years at a time.

On the other hand, given the numerous "must pass" bills that Congress already faces each year, requiring passage of an annual DHS authorization bill might be too much. One alternative is to reauthorize homeland security and defense spending biannually: Each Congress could pass a DOD authorization bill in one session and a DHS authorization bill in the other.

Considering the demands facing Congress, biannual authorization bills would be a realistic approach to focusing the lawmakers' attention and balancing oversight of the DHS and the DOD. Biannual bills would provide greater opportunity for the two departments to implement new congressional directives effectively while allowing Congress more time to evaluate how well the respective departments are implementing statutory guidance. They could also bring additional legislative stability and predictability to the annual appropriations for the two departments. Finally, a new authorization process could encourage the House and Senate to establish permanent homeland security committees.

Conclusion. The authorization process could significantly improve congressional oversight of the programs that protect Americans against global terrorism. To improve this process, Congress should:

- **Write** a bill that provides stronger statutory oversight of key personnel programs, critical missions, major research programs, and IT investments;
- **Establish** biannual authorization legislation for the DOD and the DHS, considering bills for the departments in alternate years; and
- **Create** permanent oversight committees in the House and Senate.

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