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Border Security: Setting the Right Federal Priorities

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Despite the Administration's best efforts to develop an integrated approach to controlling the nation's borders and protecting the flow of legitimate trade, travel, commerce, and immigration, competing agendas in Congress continue to promote the interests of various stakeholders at the expense of advancing a comprehensive, integrated, and prioritized program. The Administration and Congress need to agree on a bipartisan approach to border security that gives precedence to the efforts that will make the nation significantly safer and more prosperous while protecting individual freedoms. Five steps should top the "to do" list.

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- Improving the infrastructure and programs that oversee and support lawful trade and travel should be funded first.
 - Investing in internal enforcement and working with point-of-origin countries will probably offer a greater return on investment than will emphasizing interdiction at the border
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Step #1: The U.S. needs a single border services agency. The government's current organization reflects an outdated vision of how to protect America's borders. Responsibilities for visa issuance and monitoring, border security, and internal enforcement of customs and immigration are divided among three separate agencies in two departments on the erroneous assumption that threats and countermeasures can be neatly segmented in discrete activities. However, there are no frontiers in 21st century national security, nor are all border security issues best handled at the border.

Protecting the United States against terrorist threats and significantly reducing transnational crime (e.g., drug, arms, and human trafficking); environmental dangers (e.g., contagious diseases

and invasive species); and illegal entry and unlawful presence in the United States requires addressing these threats from their points of foreign origin through transiting the border to their U.S. destinations. Distinguishing clear lines of responsibility between foreign, border, and domestic security is a thing of the past. National security, economic growth, and the liberties of American citizens (as well as visitors and international business partners) can no longer be considered in isolation. The visa-issuing activities of the Department of State and the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement agencies in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should be merged into a single border services agency under the DHS.

Step #2: Monitoring and servicing legal entry into the United States should be the highest priority. Improving the infrastructure and programs that oversee and support lawful means of trade and travel should be funded first. This includes upgrad-

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ing immigration services and physical infrastructure at the busiest points of entry and fully funding programs like US-VISIT (tracking the entry and exit of visa holders); Smart Borders Initiatives (employing technology to speed the flow of people and goods); and Secure Flight (checking airline passengers against terrorist watch lists).

Most goods, services, and people enter and exit the United States through legitimate means. These networks are the lifeblood of the U.S. economy and must be appropriately managed and protected. Likewise, virtually all known terrorists who have entered the United States came in through legal channels. In addition, as the United States improves its capacity to reduce illegal entry, illicit attempts to penetrate legal networks of trade and travel will likely increase. Effective border services must already be in place to meet this challenge if the United States hopes to improve its overall security.

Step #3: Internal enforcement and international initiatives should take precedence over interdiction at the border. Too often, policymakers have assumed that the best place to reduce illegal and illicit activity is at the border. In practice, internal enforcement policies and programs, followed by working with point-of-origin and transit countries, probably offer a greater return on investment. For example, approximately 85 percent of illegal immigrants who receive final removal orders abscond.

Focusing on deporting people already ordered removed from the country is a good starting point. In the long term, initiatives such as effective workplace enforcement to discourage employment of individuals unlawfully present in the United States, domestic counterterrorism investigations including means to track down criminal aliens, and the Millennium Challenge Account (foreign aid that encourages countries to adopt polices that promote economic growth, sound governance, and the rule of law) will have a greater impact on illegal entry and unlawful presence than will simply hiring additional border guards.

Step #4: Border security must become a system of systems. Addressing the challenge of illegal entry between the points of entry cannot be ignored, but Congress needs to establish clear pri-

orities and invest in resources that create a system-of-systems approach to security. Rather than trying to control the entire border, the United States requires a network of assets that direct the right capabilities to the right places at the right times to provide appropriate responses. This will require a combination of investments in high-speed and armed-airborne assets and in robust airborne sensor capabilities linked to an intelligence and early warning network. The network would provide knowledge of activities at sea and along the border, as well as the means to analyze and share that knowledge effectively. Modernizing the CBP's air and marine interdiction capabilities in concert with increasing funding for the Coast Guard's Deepwater acquisition program ought to take precedence.

Step #5: The federal government should engage state and local governments and the private sector while respecting the principles of federalism and a free-market economy. Very little of this effort should rely on throwing money at the problem through federal grants or establishing unfunded Washington mandates. Rather, the federal government should take measured steps to strengthen the means of state and local law enforcement to conduct security and criminal-related immigration investigations, to maintain strong legal authorities for sharing law enforcement information, and to promote the development of effective national intelligence and early warning systems. Cooperative efforts with the private sector should focus on removing the barriers to effective information sharing between the government and non-government entities—information that is essential for conducting risk assessments and implementing effective vulnerability reduction measures that promote economic growth and protect the privacy of citizens and proprietary information of companies.

Conclusion. Protecting the nation against terrorists, transnational crime, and environmental and economic threats neither begins nor ends at the border. Addressing these dangers effectively requires investing money, time, and effort to get the biggest bang for our security buck.

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