

Background

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The Quadrennial Homeland Security Review: A Vital Tool for the Obama Administration

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Election Day has come and gone. While homeland security did not play a major role in the 2008 presidential election, Americans must not forget that the importance of keeping the nation safe does not diminish in the transition from one Administration to the next. Homeland security is different from many of the issues in the political marketplace because if homeland security fails, lives are lost and all the other issues are imperiled. Protecting Americans from hostile enemies, preparing for and responding to natural disasters, and securing the country's borders should be less about politics and more about implementing sound approaches that keep our country free, safe, and prosperous.

The best way to ease this transition is through the Quadrennial Homeland Security Review (QHSR). The QHSR will be a new comprehensive review by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), including recommendations for future action.

A Trip Through DHS History

The QHSR was passed into law in the 9/11 Commission Implementation Bill of 2007.¹ The review requires DHS to look back and evaluate progress made since the agency was formed and prepare a long-term strategy based on these assessments.² The basic elements of the review include:

- A strategic assessment of what has been accomplished since the inception of DHS;
- A review of national readiness;
- A review of planning, programs, budget execution systems, and internal processes; and

Talking Points

- The Quadrennial Homeland Security Review (QHSR) will occur for the first time next year. The review will be a systematic and comprehensive assessment by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) of agency progress since its inception in 2005.
- The QHSR is a valuable tool to ease the transition from one Administration to the next because it informs a new Administration on the right course for homeland security.
- The new Administration should not undertake major changes in homeland security policy until the QHSR process is complete, and should instead focus on ensuring seamless implementation of the review and its recommendations.

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- Identification of successes and challenges to DHS programs.³

According to the mandate, this process must be completed (meaning a final report submitted to Congress) by December 31, 2009, and as its name implies, repeated every four years.⁴ This review is the first of its kind for DHS, and the most recent similar review, the Second Stage Review, occurred in 2005. But the 2005 review focused on the organizational aspects of DHS and did not delve deeper into the department's successes and challenges, nor did it consider the "issues of strategy, policy, process, program and budget."⁵ While the implementation of recommendations after the Second Stage Review made great strides toward unifying DHS as a department, such as focusing FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) on its core competencies, it also produced several unwanted side effects: Congress essentially embarked on a reorganization spree, changing the organization of DHS numerous times—decreasing agency morale, breeding confusion, and preventing effective policy implementation.⁶

The QHSR is modeled after the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), in which the Department of

Defense (DOD) undertakes an assessment of defense strategy, and articulates long-term plans for defense every four years.⁷ The QDR has been successful for the DOD. The 2006 QDR, for instance, concluded that the Special Forces should be expanded by one-third.⁸ Because of these recommendations, the expansion became a reality, and the Special Forces are fulfilling vital roles in the war on terrorism.⁹

The similarities between the DOD and DHS seem to indicate that DHS would experience similar gains from undertaking this type of review. Both departments have similar missions—protecting Americans from our enemies—and similar organizational structures—big bureaucracies with a number of different cultures under one tent.¹⁰ In fact, when the DOD was first created in 1942, it experienced a similar form of shell shock when it brought together various branches of the military.¹¹ The individual armed forces originally fought this overarching structure, but since then, the DOD has created a unified defense culture that brings together these forces in order to achieve the mission of protecting the country, while maintaining respect for the traditions of individual military branches.¹² If this experience is any guide, the QHSR will assist

1. Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007, Public Law 110-53.
2. Christine Wormuth, "The 2009 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review," testimony before Subcommittee on Management, Investment, and Oversight, Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives, July 30, 2008, at <http://homeland.house.gov/SiteDocuments/20080730140511-47363.PDF> (November 18, 2008).
3. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Report to Congress on Quadrennial Homeland Security Review Resource Plan," March 27, 2008, p. 2, at <http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/qhsr-resource-plan.pdf> (November 18, 2008).
4. Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007, Public Law 110-53.
5. Wormuth, "The 2009 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review," p. 2.
6. David Heyman and James Jay Carafano, "Homeland Security 3.0: Building a National Enterprise to Keep America Free, Safe, and Prosperous," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 23, September 18, 2008, p. 3, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/sr23.cfm>.
7. Michèle A. Flournoy, "The Quadrennial Defense Review: A Model for the Quadrennial Homeland Security Review," testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives, March 20, 2007, at <http://homeland.house.gov/SiteDocuments/20070320170134-99298.pdf> (November 18, 2008).
8. U.S. Department of Defense, "Quadrennial Defense Review Report," February 6, 2006, p. 44, at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/dod/qdr-2006-report.pdf> (November 18, 2008).
9. Donna Miles, "Quiet Professionals Continue Key Role in Terror War," *Army.mil/News*, November 4, 2008, at <http://www.army.mil-news/2008/11/04/13856-quiet-professionals-continue-key-role-in-terror-war> (November 18, 2008).
10. Wormuth, "The 2009 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review," p. 2.
11. James R. Locher, III, *Victory on the Potomac: The Goldwater-Nichols Act Unifies the Pentagon* (College Station, Texas: Texas A & M University Press, 2002), pp. 15–18.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

DHS as it attempts to create its own common culture and meet its missions.

A Necessary Tool for the New Administration

The reasoning behind the QHSR is simple—it is important to look at accomplishments, take lessons learned, and craft future strategy on the basis of these lessons. A lack of smart, strategic long-term planning can translate into security loopholes that jeopardize the safety and security of Americans. The same can be said for mandates that involve a misappropriation of resources or programs or policies that tackle a problem from the wrong direction. In addition to this benefit, the QHSR also helps:

- **Create a Common Culture.** Perhaps the most important benefit of the QHSR is the opportunity to create a common culture at DHS by identifying gaps in agency coordination. A common culture is important because it provides a universal operating language with which to communicate effectively throughout the department, and allows DHS employees to work together as a team, as well as fully understand the agencies' missions. When DHS was created in 2002, it brought together 22 agencies, all with their own individual cultures, and this division has created bureaucratic obstacles.¹³ Creating a common culture does not mean throwing away institutional knowledge, individual cultures, or simply discarding the past, but rather creating a new culture that can rise above the various components to facilitate communications on a cross-DHS basis.
- **Define the Broader Homeland Security Enterprise.** The QHSR also provides an opportunity to look at what is contributing to the broader homeland security enterprise. All too often we think of homeland security in terms of the

Department of Homeland Security and forget that homeland security is much broader than one agency.¹⁴ Homeland security involves connections between ordinary citizens, state and local governments, the private sector, and the various agencies across the federal government. It is not only about organization, it is about a common goal: to keep America free, safe, and prosperous—ensuring that the United States can continue to function in the face of disaster.¹⁵ The QHSR can help the federal government target weaknesses in this enterprise and define how DHS should adapt to meet these requirements.

- **Assess Return on Investment.** The QHSR will also help DHS examine the quality of security Americans are gaining from the dollars their government is spending. All too often, homeland security is measured too quantitatively—focused, for example, on the number of border patrol agents or the number of shipping containers scanned. This measurement relies, however, on the false assumption that more “stuff” equals more security. In reality, the U.S. needs a risk-based approach to homeland security, and the government should be asking, “How much additional security are we gaining from X?” This risk-based approach ensures added security with added efficiency. The federal government has given at least \$23 billion in grants to state and local governments to develop counterterrorism and response capabilities.¹⁶ But the current program is not tailored to gaps in capabilities nor is it completely based on risk.¹⁷ So, although states may have purchased a large number of resources, they are not receiving a return on investment because there is no additional security. Needs are left unmet and highest-risk locations still lack the necessary resources to combat terrorism. The

13. Fact Sheet, “Leadership and Management Strategies for Homeland Security Merger,” U.S. Department of Homeland Security, February 11, 2004, at http://www.dhs.gov/xnews/releases/press_release_0345.shtm (November 18, 2008).

14. Heyman and Carafano, “Homeland Security 3.0,” p. 4.

15. Jena Baker McNeill, “Building Infrastructure Resiliency: Private Sector Investment in Homeland Security,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2184, September 23, 2008, p. 3, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/bg2184.cfm>.

16. Jena Baker McNeill, “Grants Should Not Be the Pork to Feed State Homeland Security Spending,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1995, July 16, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm1995.cfm>.

17. *Ibid.*

case for an accounting of resources is all the more apparent in these troubled economic times, where a lean government is crucial.

Wait and See

Undoubtedly, as any Administration would, the Obama Administration will project confidence regarding its ability to keep the United States safe from terrorist attacks and natural disasters. President Obama will be urged by some in Congress to only look forward, ignoring the past completely. But homeland security needs and requirements have changed drastically over the last decade. Dismissing Bush Administration results as useless information would be a serious detriment to the national security.

During the 1990s, America was relatively naive about the threat of terrorism. The attacks of 9/11 had not occurred. There was no DHS, no war on terrorism, and no Hurricane Katrina. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) still existed and FEMA was its own entity. Because of the vast number of changes that have occurred, the Obama Administration will possess little in the way of institutional knowledge. James Lee Witt, head of FEMA under President Clinton, and one of Senator Barack Obama's homeland security advisors during the 2008 presidential election campaign, has called repeatedly for FEMA to be removed from DHS leadership and returned to its former Cabinet-level status.¹⁸ But Witt has not been inside the halls of FEMA as an appointee since the 1990s, and much progress has occurred. The QHSR may paint a very different picture of what successes could be obtained from moving FEMA from DHS to an independent agency. This review gives the Obama Administration an opportunity to gain this institutional knowledge, as well as a clear understanding of the organization, structure, and major programs handled by DHS. The review will provide a set path by which to reach out to Bush Administration officials for knowledge and lessons learned.

The Obama Administration should use the QHSR as the catalyst for its homeland security policy—not the other way around. The new Administration should not change homeland security merely for the sake of change, and the QHSR must not be used as a politically driven showcase of departmental mistakes. Such politicking would simply be a threat to national security, stand in the way of real progress, and ignore the successes that should be continued under the next Administration.

The best course for the Obama Administration may be to take a wait-and-see approach, focusing on taking only absolutely necessary steps and waiting until the QHSR is released in December 2009 before making major changes at DHS. This “moratorium” should also include not tinkering with the department's organization.¹⁹ Such a commitment will obviously be difficult for political appointees looking to make a name for themselves; everyone wants to look like a reformer when he or she assumes a new position in a new Administration—but our nation's security depends on everyone's restraint and diligence.

The Countdown to the QHSR

DHS is currently in the planning stages of the QHSR. But issues remain that could jeopardize the successful implementation of the review: A new team might attempt to start over, thinking that for the QHSR to be successful, all planning and organization must come from them. This would be a big mistake. It would restart the clock on QHSR implementation and might stymie it permanently. The Obama team should instead work with the outgoing Administration to ensure implementation of QHSR recommendations, and the Bush team should be careful not to craft the QHSR on the basis of pre-set outcomes.²⁰

DHS has requested \$1.65 million from Congress to complete the review.²¹ Coupled with this request is an appeal for two new full-time employees dedicated to the QHSR, bringing the total number of staff

18. Paul Whyte, “Former Director wants FEMA out of Homeland Security,” *USA Today*, March 25, 2005, at http://www.usatoday.com/weather/hurricane/2005-03-25-witt-fema_x.htm (November 2, 2008). See also Jena Baker McNeill, “Removing FEMA from DHS Would be a Terrible Mistake,” *Heritage Foundation WebMemo* No. 2071, September 22, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm2071.cfm>.

19. Heyman and Carafano, “Homeland Security 3.0,” p. 3.

20. Wormuth, “The 2009 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review,” p. 5.

dedicated to the project to six.²² The QHSR will not be successful if it is late or incomplete because of a lack of staff. More in-house people are needed because the nature of an introspective review such as the QHSR is that it should be conducted by the people who have been and will be involved in the projects under examination. These people know best why a program did or did not work, and what lessons can be learned, as opposed to outside entities that might attempt to color the department's progress in more sweeping generalities. Furthermore, the process of the QHSR gives the new Obama appointees an excellent way to learn the ins and outs of DHS while developing future strategy for the department. However, it might be lean times staffing-wise when President-elect Obama takes office because most appointees probably will not be confirmed until around spring and summer 2009.²³ This means that a small number of employees will have to be diligent to guide the QHSR.

Back to the Future

All too often, projects similar to the QHSR become just another deliverable with the multiple other reading materials for the Administration and Congress. This fate for the QHSR would be a waste of taxpayer dollars and would do nothing to improve DHS in the long run. Ensuring that the QHSR is an influential document will require several actions:

- **Full Funding of the QHSR.** Congress should fund the QHSR fully. Without adequate funding, the QHSR will either be completed late, or the review and implementation of its recommendations will not occur at all. Current funding levels are not sufficient to implement the QHSR.
- **Leadership by Senior DHS Leaders.** Successful completion of the QHSR will require support from the very highest levels of the Department of

Homeland Security.²⁴ If senior leaders are engaged, monitor progress, and make the QHSR a high priority from day one, it will be completed successfully by December 2009 so that the recommendations can be implemented shortly thereafter. For senior leaders looking to shine, taking leadership on the QHSR is an opportunity to demonstrate a commitment to the efficacy of the department. This leadership will trickle down into all levels of DHS, inspiring political and career staff alike to take pride in the QHSR.

Such guidance by senior leaders will also ensure that the QHSR is not simply a blip on the DHS radar and continues into the future. Developing future leaders that understand the importance of strategic planning can be accomplished by creating a cadre of homeland security professionals who through accreditation, training, and assignment are well versed in the needs of tomorrow's homeland security enterprise.²⁵

- **Outside Help Encouraged, but Well Defined.** Given the resource constraints of the QHSR, it would be foolish to assume that DHS can complete the QHSR alone. DHS should engage both internal and external stakeholders before, after, and during the process, and effectively use contractors to fill valuable support roles throughout.²⁶

The Bush Administration is currently forming an outside Advisory Board to assist in the QHSR process. DHS should look to the academic community, trade associations, state and local governments, and various other homeland security stakeholders to identify successes and gaps in the current system, and to develop recommendations for the future. These outside stakeholders should be homeland security professionals from across the political spectrum.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

25. James Jay Carafano, "Missing Pieces in Homeland Security: Interagency Education, Assignments, and Professional Accreditation," Heritage Foundation *Executive Memorandum* No. 1013, October 16, 2006, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm2071.cfm>.

26. Wormuth, "The 2009 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review," p. 7.

The nature of the QHSR does mean that it should be done largely in-house at DHS. But this does not mean that contractors do not have a role in the process. Contractors can assist DHS employees so that they will have more time to concentrate on the substantive portions of the QHSR. Contractors, however, should be used under clear budget limits, deadlines, and expectations. Ambiguous contractor requirements were part of the problem behind a key DHS program—the Secure Border Initiative’s *SBI-net*, the technological framework for security at the Southern border—where fuzzy standards for progress led DHS to be sorely disappointed with the contractor’s performance, delaying implementation of the framework and wasted considerable amounts of money.²⁷

- **Prioritize State and Local Integration.** One aspect that should be an integral part of the review is integration of state and local homeland security efforts into the broader homeland security framework. The review should not only analyze state and local integration within DHS, but it should also examine how effectively state and local governments have been integrated into the overall homeland security enterprise. Effective homeland security begins at the grassroots level. For example, from a border security perspective, certain states have a significant stake in whether enforcement is successful and they have an incentive to make their communities safer. The federal government should not usurp the ability of states to take an individualized approach to disaster.

DHS should look for avenues to put the states back in the driver’s seat, reverting power back to these state and local governments. In areas where the federal government is necessary, state and local input is still vital. Here, the QHSR should focus on information-sharing and coordination with state and local entities.

- **Reform Congressional Oversight of Homeland Security.** DHS and the broader homeland security enterprise are drastically different than when the agency was created. But congressional oversight of homeland security has remained largely the same—to the detriment of DHS. The 108 committees and subcommittees with jurisdiction over DHS routinely batter the department.²⁸ These committees often issue conflicting demands, making successful policy execution difficult.²⁹ DHS is routinely dragged in front of a committee merely for the sake of making a political spectacle of agency mistakes.

Such harassment is unacceptable and hinders the success of the department, while jeopardizing the security of Americans. Furthermore, the QHSR’s recommendations will not receive effective oversight if Congress continues to mismanage its role. Congressional leaders need to consolidate congressional oversight of DHS into four standing committees, two in the House and two in the Senate (appropriations and authorization). It will not be easy, and will likely be unpopular, but it is the right decision.

With Great Hope

Many observers hope that the Obama Administration will see the value of the QHSR and use it to guide DHS through its very first transition between Administrations. Transition is not just about looking better than the previous Administration. A haphazard changeover will do more than ruffle a few feathers or produce a couple of bureaucratic snafus. Its impact could be felt far beyond Washington—jeopardizing America’s security for years to come.

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27. U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Secure Border Initiative: *SBI-net* Planning and Management Improvements Needed to Control Risks,” GAO-07-504T, February 27, 2007, pp. 5–7, at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d07504t.pdf> (November 18, 2008).

28. Jena Baker McNeill, “Congressional Oversight in Dire Need of Overhaul,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2161, July 14, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandDefense/bg2161.cfm>.

29. *Ibid.*