

# WebMemo



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## Homeland Security Oversight Reform Requires Leadership

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On November 12, senior House Republican leaders sent a letter to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi urging her to amend Rule X, the rule governing how committees are organized.

This letter is a positive step toward changing the chaotic system of congressional oversight of homeland security. The fact that the letter came from Members of Congress and not the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) itself demonstrates that the current system has become such a bureaucratic nightmare that congressmen themselves are compelled to take aggressive action—even if it is against their own self-interest. Speaker Pelosi should recognize the significance of this letter and take steps accordingly.

**Congressional Chaos.** The 9/11 Commission recommended that Congress consolidate jurisdiction of homeland security into a “single, principal point of oversight and review.” Since this time, although the House and Senate did create two standing committees with jurisdiction over homeland security, the web of oversight has remained extremely tangled.

Currently, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reports to 108 committees, subcommittees, and commissions. While many in and out of Congress complain that the current system is too confusing, Members of Congress seem reluctant to give up jurisdiction. Members like having a slice of the homeland security oversight pie, because being tough on homeland security translates into tremendous political rewards. But the current system is

confusing, highly burdensome, and impedes policy progress through often conflicting demands on DHS.

**An Inside Job.** Congressional oversight is not often covered in the news, nor is DHS oversight an issue that most Americans are knowledgeable or concerned about. For this reason, real change is going to have to come from Members who recognize that this chaos has a tremendously negative effect on the ability of DHS to protect the homeland—to the detriment of all Americans. Congress should:

- **Consolidate Oversight of Homeland Security.** Congress should consolidate oversight and limit jurisdiction over homeland security to four committees: the House and Senate appropriations committees and the House and Senate authorization committees. Furthermore, the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee should be divided, with a committee exclusively dedicated to homeland security.
- **Pass an Authorization Bill.** Congress should quickly enact a DHS authorization bill that includes a structure for key personnel programs, critical missions, major research programs, and investments in information technology—for both the efficacy of DHS and increased legis-

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[www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm2143.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm2143.cfm)

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lative stability for the agency so that it understands more of what Congress expects prior to policy execution.

- *Reshape the Nature of Oversight.* Through its oversight power, Congress has a major role to play in DHS's success. Congress should be a partner, not an adversary, in this function. It should focus on defining where homeland security should go and how we should get there. Congress's aim should be to find the right policy mix that achieves resiliency—the capacity to maintain continuity of activity even in the face of adversity, threats, and disaster—while recognizing that we cannot deter all threats. The latter, as

evidenced by the 100 percent scanning mandate, is severely lacking in current oversight.

**Need for Leadership.** Streamlining congressional oversight will not be an easy task. Nor is it a feel-good measure that will earn points with voters. But real leadership requires making decisions that are smart, even if they do not grab headlines. It is time for Congress to show that kind of leadership.

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