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Bush Farewell Addresses Homeland Security

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In his farewell address to the nation, President George W. Bush reflected on one of the central challenges of his Administration—responding to the threat of transnational terrorism. That effort including establishing the foundation of national homeland security framework—a collaborative effort of federal agencies, state and local governments, the private sector and, friendly and allied nations in combating efforts making the murder of innocents an international enterprise. It will be up to the new Administration and the Congress to build on that legacy.

Looking Back. Bush began his remarks by recalling the event that most shaped the course of his presidency. “This evening,” he recalled, “my thoughts return to the first night I addressed you from this house, September 11, 2001. That morning, terrorists took nearly 3,000 lives in the worst attack on America since Pearl Harbor.” He also highlighted some of the key post-9/11 initiatives taken in response to the threat of transnational terrorism. “Over the past seven years, a new Department of Homeland Security has been created, he noted:

[t]he military, the intelligence community, and the FBI have been transformed. Our nation is equipped with new tools to monitor the terrorists’ movements, freeze their finances, and break up their plots. And with strong allies at our side, we have taken the fight to the terrorists and those who support them. Afghanistan has gone from a nation where the Taliban harbored al-Qaeda and stoned women in the streets to a young democracy that is fighting terror and encouraging girls to go to school.

It is fitting that Bush chose to make these events the cornerstone of his address.

Where We Are. The President rightly emphasized that these efforts were necessary. Since 9/11, a number of plots aimed at killing Americans on American soil—some linked to al-Qaeda; others inspired by their actions; some only sharing a horrific ideology that any cause should be advanced by the deliberate intentional murder of innocents—have been foiled. Likewise, America’s friends and allies around the world, from the people of Iraq to Europe and Southwest Asia, have been targeted for attack.

Thanks to serious and effective counterterrorism programs, the U.S and its allies have become “harder” targets for transnational terrorists. Plots have been thwarted, leaders killed or captured, networks attacked, and the flow of money and recruits disrupted. The President rightly concluded:

There is legitimate debate about many of these decisions. But there can be little debate about the results. America has gone more than seven years without another terrorist attack on our soil. This is a tribute to those who toil night and day to keep us safe—law enforcement officers, intelligence analysts, homeland security and diplomatic personnel, and the men and women of the United States Armed Forces.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm2228.cfm

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Looking Forward. Building on the homeland security successes and improving on efforts already implemented falls to a new Congress and new Administration. The centerpiece of the Bush Administration's success has been the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which integrated many of the functions of combating terrorism and preparing for and responding to disasters under one agency. While many still consider the department a work in progress, the most pressing needs for enhancing the country's protection from transnational terrorist threats do not lie in a major reorganizing of the DHS or revisiting its roles and missions. Rather Congress and the new Administration should shift their focus to strengthening the effectiveness of the national homeland security enterprise as a whole.

To be able to respond to threats with greater agility, our new national leadership must foster better decision making in Congress and in the interagency process and further facilitate information sharing throughout all elements of the national security enterprise. Furthermore, to close the national security gaps vulnerable to terrorist exploitation, our nation must empower individuals and communities and seek the cooperation of friends and allies around the world for our homeland security activities.

The next Congress and Administration have an opportunity to take a fresh look at our national

homeland security enterprise. The Administration should adopt an interagency approach led by a revitalized, reorganized, and integrated National Security Council that treats domestic and international security concerns in a more holistic manner.

In addition to consolidating committee jurisdiction over the DHS, Congress should establish a bipartisan caucus that meets regularly to consider issues affecting the national homeland security enterprise. Finally, both the next Congress and Administration need to engage private businesses and the American people more effectively.

President Bush began the effort of building the homeland security enterprise that America needs to address the dangers of the 21st century. It is the job of our new leadership in Washington, the American people, and our global friends and allies to finish the job—frustrating forever the ambitions of those who would use the instrument of transnational terrorism to dictate terms to the rest of the world.

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