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Why a Policy Undersecretary Office for Homeland Security Department Remains Essential

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In 2004, when an independent, bipartisan report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies and The Heritage Foundation called for reorganizing the then newly established Department of Homeland Security, both the department's leadership and Congress took the report seriously. As a result of report's recommendations, DHS established a single office for integrated planning and policy development.

The report, however, also called for the creation of an undersecretary for policy and planning to oversee the office—that did not happen. Though the measure was introduced several times, the reform was blocked. However, a new Congress and a new Administration offer another opportunity to address the need for such a position. Both the White House and congressional leadership should make establishing an undersecretary for policy and planning in the Department of Homeland Security a priority.

Not Present at the Creation. Established by the Homeland Security Act of 2002, the Department of Homeland Security was created to integrate a wide variety of ongoing public safety, disaster response, and law enforcement activities under a single federal agency. The initial organization of the department, however, lacked many of the tools necessary to pull together the myriad of ongoing actions for which it was responsible. While Congress authorized a handful of undersecretaries in the enabling legislation, the positions were designated to oversee running specific components of the department. There were no positions in the department secretariat for developing cross-cutting policies and pro-

grams essential to building a national homeland security enterprise.

In 2005, after becoming the secretary of homeland security, Michael Chertoff initiated his "Second Stage Review," an effort to analyze the operations of the department and introduce necessary institutional reforms. One of the first outcomes of the review was the establishment of a department policy office and the appointment of an assistant secretary to direct it.

Following the creation of its policy arm, the department was able to better address a range of critical issues from negotiating with foreign governments and international agencies on a host of issues to developing inter-departmental polices for cooperating with other federal agencies such as the Department of Defense. Among the most notable achievements of the policy shop was crafting a strategy for revising and reforming the Visa Waiver Program (which facilitates short-term tourist and business travel among the United States and other partner countries). The department's effort led to congressional authorization to expand the program, adding eight new members, including important U.S. strategic allies such as South Korea and the Czech Republic.

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Chertoff, however, did not have the authority to elevate the head of the policy and planning office to the undersecretary level. That initiative had to come from Congress. Although on several occasions the House Homeland Security Committee introduced language to convert an existing authorized DHS undersecretary position to cover the policy portfolio, these pieces of legislation never came to fruition.

Next Steps. Establishing a DHS undersecretary for policy and planning should remain a priority for the Administration and Congress. Without the authority of undersecretary status, the policy office—despite its achievements to date—lacks the stature of other major components of the department. This lack of status is particularly problematic when dealing with other components of the federal government and dur-

ing participation in “deputies” meetings in the security councils at the White House.

An undersecretary position, confirmed by the Senate, provides the stature necessary to direct homeland security policy and planning. Consequently, Congress should elevate the head of policy and planning in the Homeland Security Department to the undersecretary level. Such a promotion would place the department’s head policy official at the same level of those of other departments, such as the Department of Defense, who hold similar portfolios.

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