

# WebMemo



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## SBI*net*: Homeland Security Should Not Abandon Border Security Technology

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Securing America's southern border is more important than ever. Yet the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is preparing to drop key border security technologies that it has been developing since 2005. This is a decision that makes no sense. Given some of the problems that have occurred with SBI*net*—a program to deploy cameras, sensors, and radar technology at the southwest border—a review could help improve the program. Abandoning SBI*net* altogether, however, would be a complete waste of resources.

Going forward, DHS needs to improve its ability to oversee implementation of large-scale technological solutions like SBI*net* while fixing problems that plague successful program implementation. Coupled with a suite of other effective technologies, SBI*net* is needed to help fill security gaps at the border.

**Border Security Blues.** The Bush Administration first developed SBI*net* as the “technological component” of the Secure Border Initiative, which ramped up security efforts at the border with more manpower, border fences, and new equipment for detecting illegal border crossings. By using cameras, radars, and sensors, SBI*net* would create a “common operating picture,” and as a result, agents on the ground would be able to shift resources to a particular area of concern.

While SBI*net* certainly has the capability to provide knowledge to agents on the ground, the previous Administration over-promised its abilities as well as the rate at which the program could be deployed, treating it as a one-stop solution for bor-

der security technology. The Administration also moved forward with an ambitious expansion plan that simply did not mesh with the legal and regulatory obstacles that would inevitably stem from the program's deployment. Furthermore, the program faced real problems in terms of gaining feedback from operators on the ground as well as from technical snafus.

Ironically, while DHS was finally getting the project on track, the political leadership of DHS began walking away from the program. In March, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano announced that she would be stopping future expansion of SBI*net*. She said that she wanted to assess the program before deciding to move forward. Less than a month later, Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Alan Bersin declared during congressional testimony that the program was “not practicable.” Now, the draft Reid-Schumer-Menendez amnesty bill calls for dumping SBI*net* altogether.

**The Right Changes.** Secretary Napolitano has described her review of SBI*net* as an opportunity to look at the question of whether the program should move forward. Given the program's potential to use

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technology in a way that can better suit the needs of the men and women of the Border Patrol, the justification for *SBI*net seems self-explanatory. And given that \$1.1 billion in taxpayer dollars have already been spent on development, abandoning the program would be a colossal waste. What should rightly be explored, however, is how to fix the program so that the initial delays do not reoccur and dollars are spent more wisely going forward.

The Administration should resist using *SBI*net to differentiate border policy from one Administration to the next. The investments of the Bush Administration, including fencing and manpower, have made advances in making the border more secure. Now is the time for programs like *SBI*net, coupled with other technologies and other smaller improvements in security efforts, to complete the job. Specifically, DHS should:

- **Move forward with *SBI*net.** A review of the problem should not halt *SBI*net altogether or drastically push implementation into the future. Given the program's ability to provide targeted enforcement at the border, it is vital that *SBI*net is part of the programmatic mix.
- **Look for a family of solutions.** The tendency in Washington is to look for a silver-bullet solution to large-scale problems. However, simplifying a complex series of border security issues by providing a single answer will not solve the problem. The Bush Administration made the major investments of fencing and manpower; it is now time for the Obama Administration to follow

these changes with the right technologies to fill the remaining gaps.

- **Revamp DHS management of large programs.** DHS has shown time and again its inability to manage large scale R&D projects that employ major technological components. The department oftentimes fails to understand what it actually needs out of particular technologies, meaning the final products often do not come close to the desired results. Improving the requirements process and making key reforms would help to improve large program management.
- **Resist amnesty-based immigration reform.** The new Democratic framework for comprehensive immigration reform focuses on providing an amnesty for the estimated 10.8 million illegal immigrants inside the United States. Yet amnesty would overwhelm any additional security measures at the border and would only incentivize more illegal entry. Consequently, such a plan should be avoided.

**Do Not Lose Sight of the Primary Goal.** Closing gaps at the border requires the right technologies. While the Administration moves carefully through its review, it should not lose sight of the primary goal: plugging security gaps at the border.

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