

ISSUE BRIEF

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Homeland Security: Developing a Strategic Road Map for the Future

By *Matt A. Mayer*

As the deadline for the second Quadrennial Homeland Security Review (QHSR) approaches at the end of this year, much attention is being given to the record of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and what the department's proper role should be. Ultimately, the strategy cannot simply be to maintain the status quo, continuing down the same path for the next 10 years that DHS has followed for the past decade.

Although people debate about whether the creation of DHS was necessary after 9/11, there is no denying that core governmental functions are the responsibility of the Cabinet agency. Thus, it is particularly important that DHS operates efficiently and effectively, especially in light of sequestration cuts, which are expected to reduce DHS's budget by 5 percent.¹

Building a Strong Relationship with Congress.

Instead of producing the QHSR as a box-checking exercise, DHS should use this required report as an opportunity to build credibility with key leaders in Congress. This should not include only those on the appropriations committees that are responsible for funding it.

DHS has a reputational problem on Capitol Hill (and with most people who follow the agency closely). It is notorious for turning in reports in an untimely fashion and with lackluster content. For example, the most recent QHSR, which was due in December 2009, was not completed until February 2010. This is par for the course.

The bureaucracy at DHS and in Congress contributes significantly to this problem. While accountability is good, for over 100 subcommittees in Congress to have jurisdiction over DHS, which is now the case, is both inefficient and unnecessary. Heritage's Jessica Zuckerman highlighted this issue earlier this year:

[T]he web of congressional bureaucracy results in multiple and often conflicting messages and guidance from Congress to DHS. It also places a significant time burden on the department. Between 2009 and 2010, for example, DHS conducted more than 3,900 briefings and testified before Congress more than 285 times. The cost of such oversight is estimated in the tens of millions of dollars, with thousands of lost work hours that DHS could have spent executing its mission.²

Zuckerman goes on to recommend that Congress adopt the 9/11 Commission's recommendation to reduce DHS oversight to three committees in the House of Representatives and three committees in the Senate, similar to the oversight structure for the Department of Defense. Congress could do a lot to help DHS with its reputational problem by reducing the oversight burden. Through the QHSR, the Secretary should push for such reform.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib3909>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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Combating Structural Issues. In addition to the burden of congressional oversight, the structure of the agency contributes to its disjointedness. The DHS structure should be carefully examined and evaluated as the next QHSR is prepared. As Heritage wrote in a report on the QHSR earlier this year, the central DHS office has very little authority over the various units operating under its direction. In March, we published the following:

These units have functional independence from headquarters, leaving the Homeland Security Secretary with significant de jure responsibility but little practical de facto authority. Indeed, the Secretary is often unable to achieve effective change within the department, save through the force of personality. If the department (and the enterprise for which it is responsible) is to become a mature, functioning institution, that needs to change.³

The QHSR should include a strategic plan for centralized management of DHS's seven units, including how these independent agencies can collaborate and share resources to better fulfill DHS's mission.

Time and Resources. Aside from its overall structure and the congressional oversight burden it faces, DHS should examine how it spends its time and resources. In the QSHR, DHS should narrow its strategic focus and rely more on state and local governments. Because the scope of DHS is very broad, resources are thinly spread and are used on activities that are not crucial to homeland security. Those resources should be saved or invested in national preparedness.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), for instance, provides a great example of how DHS can and should scale back while redirecting its time and money to prepare for emergencies that truly overwhelm local governments and states. Instead of reserving FEMA for catastrophic events that span regions or states, Presidents too often

rush to federalize small localized disasters, many of which are considered routine for the area (e.g., seasonal floods in Iowa or tornados in Oklahoma).

DHS should redefine in the QHSR what constitutes a federal emergency and work with Congress to reform the Stafford Act to raise thresholds for disaster declarations. President Ronald Reagan's Administration declared an average of 28 disasters per year. The yearly average per President has steadily increased since that time. Under President Barack Obama, FEMA declared an average of 153 disasters each year—roughly one every 2.5 days.

With federal emergencies occurring so frequently, FEMA is perpetually in response mode, which leaves little time to plan and prepare for major catastrophes. Thus, current FEMA strategy actually undermines national preparedness instead of bolstering it. It also sends the wrong message to state and local governments, which have little incentive to adequately prepare for disasters in terms of planning and funding.

The QHSR should take a serious look at FEMA's record and spending and develop a strategy that focuses less on each passing "disaster" and more on long-term planning.

Maritime Homeland Security. The Coast Guard has become an increasingly crucial maintainer of national security through varied missions such as drug interdiction, maritime disaster response, and maintaining presence in regions as disparate as the Caribbean and the Arctic. To continue to perform this array of missions, the Coast Guard requires significant fleet recapitalization. Many of the vessels in the current fleet are beyond their intended service lives and are experiencing malfunctions at an increasing rate. Failure to modernize the fleet in a responsible time frame will result in the Coast Guard's being unable to execute all of its missions.

DHS should detail this serious security threat in the QHSR and work with Congress to dedicate resources for modernizing the fleet. Ensuring a

1. Stephanie Condon, "Sequester Cuts Will Impact Homeland Security, Napolitano Says," CBS News, February 25, 2013, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-250_162-57571184/sequester-cuts-will-impact-homeland-security-napolitano-says/ (accessed April 5, 2013).

2. Jessica Zuckerman, "DHS: Congressional Oversight Remains Broken," The Heritage Foundation, The Foundry, January 3, 2013, <http://blog.heritage.org/2013/01/03/dhs-congressional-oversight-remains-broken/>.

3. James Jay Carafano, Jessica Zuckerman, Matt A. Mayer, Paul Rosenzweig, and Brian Slattery, "The Second Quadrennial Homeland Security Review: Setting Priorities for the Next Four Years," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2766, February 12, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/02/the-second-quadrennial-homeland-security-review-setting-priorities-for-the-next-four-years>.

robust Coast Guard fleet is essential to making sure the United States can adequately protect its waters.

More Than Checking the Box. DHS has a tremendous task ahead in preparing the QHSR—if it does so in a thoughtful manner. While most reports are generated to check required boxes, the QHSR may be exactly what DHS needs to bring serious reform to the agency.

From oversight and bureaucratic structure to duties, planning, and the allocation of scarce

resources, DHS has a great opportunity to repurpose itself while building credibility on Capitol Hill. The Secretary would do well to make this QHSR and its implementation her legacy.

—*Matt A. Mayer is a Visiting Fellow at The Heritage Foundation and President of the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions in Columbus, Ohio. He has served as Counselor to the Deputy Secretary and Acting Executive Director for the Office of Grants and Training in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.*