



How a murky mission and partisan reputation doomed the DHS disinformation board

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News that the 3-week-old Disinformation Governance Board appears to be shutting down came as no surprise to its supporters or its detractors, who saw an agency that launched without a clear direction and quickly became a pinata for critics.

Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas announced the board during a congressional hearing April 27, setting off a firestorm of events that included fierce questioning of the new agency and its stated mission.

"The board has been grossly and intentionally mischaracterized: it was never about censorship or policing speech in any manner," reads a statement from an unnamed spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security. "It was designed to ensure we fulfill our mission to protect the homeland, while protecting core constitutional rights. However, false attacks have become a significant distraction from the department's vitally important work to combat disinformation that threatens the safety and security of the American people."

Mayorkas verbally announced the board's formation during the hearing, but DHS never issued a press release about the group, and department leaders were mostly averse to speaking about it afterward. According to the *Washington Post*, even Executive Director Nina Jankowicz was told not to talk about the board publicly. Jankowicz resigned from her position Wednesday.

Criticisms of Jankowicz included her history of making misleading statements, such as those regarding British ex-spy Christopher Steele's discredited Trump-Russia dossier, and downplaying controversy embroiling President Joe Biden's son. A former disinformation fellow at the Wilson Center and adviser to the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, much of Jankowicz's career has focused on domestic disinformation rather than foreign threats.

The board was lampooned as an inappropriate government foray into free speech, with many comparing it to the Ministry of Truth from George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*. A group of 175 House Republicans sent a letter to Mayorkas earlier this month demanding more information about the disinformation board.

Blowback came swiftly following the initial announcement, and it was never made entirely clear what the board's purpose was. DHS eventually issued a fact sheet but did not directly answer follow-up questions from the *Washington Examiner*.

Former White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the board was the continuation of Trump-era DHS initiatives, a claim the agency's leaders from the period disputed. Chad Wolf, formerly the department's acting secretary, applauded the board's demise.

"I'm glad to see that DHS is stepping back from this terrible idea, but I'm still unnerved by the fact that anybody within DHS or the Biden administration would have thought to green light it in the first place," Wolf said.

For many, the board morphed into a punch line for criticism of the Biden administration. Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, for example, joked that the board should review a Biden tweet he disagreed with.

Some conservatives also questioned DHS's statement that mischaracterizations of the board led to its demise.

"Oddly, this Disinformation Governance Board was supposed to be powerful enough to combat foreign operatives and global disinformation campaigns," said Jenny Beth Martin, honorary chairwoman of Tea Party Patriots Action. "For three weeks, the Biden administration has scolded us that this was all about foreign disinformation. But some domestic ridicule shut it down? Really?"

It remains unclear if the board is being totally dissolved or if it might return in some other form. White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said during Wednesday's press briefing that the board has never convened and that former Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff and former Deputy Attorney General Jamie Gorelick will do an "assessment."

At the same time, she said work to address disinformation against national security will continue.

"Neither Jankowicz nor the board have anything to do with censorship or with removing content from anywhere," she said. "Their role is to ensure that national security officials are updated on how misinformation is affecting the threat environment. [Jankowicz] has strong credentials and a history of calling out misinformation from both the Left and the Right."

The review process is supposed to be completed within 75 days, during which time the board will not meet. The White House was not involved in the decision to initiate the pause, Jean-Pierre added.

It's an uneven landing for the board, says Cato Institute policy analyst Will Duffield, but perhaps an appropriate one given its tangled history.

"It seems like sort of an awkward shutdown," Duffield said. "But then, it was launched awkwardly too."