



Let's Just Kill 'Homeland Security'

When it's not making us take our shoes off, it's trampling our civil liberties and 'building' centers that don't exist. Enough already.

By Nick Gillespie

February 25, 2015

Are you nervous, America?

If nothing happens before Friday, the mighty Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—every bit as much a WTF legacy of George W. Bush as those surreal White House Christmas videos that featured Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson talking to Barney “the First Dog” like the Son of Sam killer—will lose its funding due to a budget fight between congressional Republicans and President Barack Obama.

And when DHS funding ends, then...well, nothing much, actually, it turns out.

Without funding, about 30,000 “non-essential” DHS employees will be told not to show up for work. The other 210,000 or so workers who are considered “essential” and “exempt” will still have to punch the clock, although most of them won't get paid until after the budget stalemate is ended. Not optimal, but not the worst outcome, either.

DHS oversees almost two dozen agencies and groups, including the Coast Guard, Customs and Border Patrol, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), immigration processing and enforcement, the Secret Service, and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), the brave folks responsible for an endless series of junk-touching, drug-stealing, and kiddie-porn scandals.

Given all those fearsome responsibilities, you'd figure Barack Obama would be sweating gravy over even a partial shutdown of DHS. Instead, last week he stressed not the “security” part of the department's functioning, but all the dollars its workers spend in a congressional district near you. After noting that most DHS employees would be working for IOUs during a funding freeze, he said: “These are folks, who if they don't have a paycheck, are not going to be able to spend that money in your states. It will have a direct impact on your economy.” That's about as open an

admission that federal employment is essentially a form of workfare as you're likely to hear. Only later in his comments did Obama get around to the idea that these same workers also, you know, keep us safe from the odd underwear bomber and all those undocumented Mexicans we hire to cook our food and clean our houses.

Unsurprisingly, Obama didn't mention the Secret Service, which is supposed to protect the president but has lately been way too busy opening White House doors for knife-wielding psychos and cheating whores down South America way to focus on its core businesses.

Even Obama's Secretary of Homeland Security, Jeh Johnson, couldn't muster much in the way of if-then fearmongering. Earlier this month, Johnson trotted out a parade of horrors that was about as scary as a late-night rerun of Plan 9 From Outer Space. Without uninterrupted funding, warned the secretary, some of the "government activities vital to homeland security and public safety" that might be affected included "new communications equipment for over 80 public safety agencies in the Los Angeles area to replace aging and incompatible radio systems," "fifteen mobile command centers for possible catastrophic incidents in the state of Kentucky," and "bomb squads in the state of Idaho." My God, where have our priorities as a nation gone? Come Friday, Pocatello is a sitting duck.

The current funding situation is the product of an impasse stemming from Obama's executive action, issued last November, temporarily expanding the number of illegal immigrants protected from deportation proceedings. The Migration Policy Institute figures about 3.7 million illegals (out of a total of around 11 million) would be protected by the action. That move didn't sit well with Republicans in Congress, who passed a continuing resolution that pointedly left out full funding for DHS until this year, when they would control majorities in the House and the Senate.

How any of this will play out is anybody's guess, especially since a federal judge in Texas has at least temporarily blocked Obama's plan and it's far from clear that the administration's legal appeals will prove successful.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) has tried his damndest to force reluctant Democrats to vote yes or no on the president's immigration action before any sort of DHS funding bill hits the floor. Perhaps mindful of those "fifteen mobile command centers" for Kentucky hanging in the balance, it seems as if McConnell has "thrown in the towel" on the cause even if House Republicans are ready to hang tough.

Such hijinks may well be smart—or dumb—politics, but they distract from a far more important and serious question: Why do we even have a Department of Homeland Security in the first place?

Created in 2002 in the mad crush of panic, paranoia, and patriotic pants-wetting after the 9/11 attacks, DHS has always been a stupid idea. Even at the time, creating a new cabinet-level department responsible for 22 different agencies and services was suspect. Exactly how was

adding a new layer of bureaucracy supposed to make us safer (and that's leaving aside the question of just what the hell "homeland security" actually means)? DHS leaders answer to no fewer than 90 congressional committees and subcommittees that oversee the department's various functions. Good luck with all that.

But don't feel sorry for the shmoes running DHS. Over the last decade, the budget for DHS has doubled (to \$54 billion in 2014) even as its reputation for general mismanagement, wasteful spending, and civil liberties abuses flourishes. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) routinely lists DHS on its "high risk" list of badly run outfits and surveys of federal workers have concluded "that DHS is the worst department to work for in the government," writes Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute. He also notes, a "Washington Post investigation found that many DHS employees say they have 'a dysfunctional work environment' with 'abysmal morale.'" Somewhere, the Postmaster General is pumping his fist.

It only gets worse when you look at the sheer amount of junk DHS spends money on. The Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), for instance, built 21 homes for agents in a remote part of Arizona. The price tag was \$680,000 per house in a part of the country where the average home sold for less than \$90,000. When the TSA isn't hiring defrocked, child-molesting priests, Edwards notes that it is shelling out hundreds of millions of dollars on radiation detectors for cargo containers that don't work and full-body airport scanners without bothering to "perform a cost-benefit analysis...before rolling them out nationwide."

And while the spooks at the National Security Agency and other intelligence and law-enforcement agencies get most of the ink when it comes to imperiling civil liberties, DHS is more than holding its own. It administers "fusion centers," which pull together all sorts of legal, semi-legal, and flatly illegal surveillance methods of citizens by state and local police.

A 2012 investigation by the Senate's Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs found that fusion centers trafficked in "oftentimes shoddy, rarely timely [information, while] sometimes endangering citizens' civil liberties and Privacy Act protections." The material collected was "more often than not unrelated to terrorism." On the upside, as my Reason colleague Jesse Walker noted, the report found "some of the fusion centers touted by the Department of Homeland Security do not, in fact, exist."

With all this in mind, it would be better for Congress and the president to focus less on two-bit political wrangling over this or that part of DHS funding and more on heaving the whole department into the dustbin. From a politician's point of view, that might indeed mean fewer dollars being spent in your state right now, but you'd also be repaid in full with votes of grateful citizens from all over the place.