



A former insane asylum is a fitting place for the mess that is Homeland Security

By Gene Healy |

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It's "a boondoggle of epic proportions," an exasperated Rep. Richard Hudson, R-N.C., told Department of Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson at a recent congressional hearing, "if you're in the middle of a huge mess, you stop digging."

The specific object of Hudson's ire was department's massive new headquarters complex in southeast Washington, the biggest federal construction project since the Pentagon. As the Washington Times reported Sunday, the project -- featuring amenities like eco-friendly "rainwater toilets" and sustainable Brazilian hardwood decking -- is running at least a decade late and over a billion dollars short.

But the larger point applies to the department itself and the nebulous, all-encompassing rubric under which it's organized. "Homeland Security" is a mess; "stop digging."

"We should finish what we started," Johnson countered, "the morale of DHS, unity of the mission, that emphasis would go a long way if we could get to a headquarters."

The department, which ranks dead last among large agencies on the Partnership for Public Service's 2013 "Best Places to Work in the Federal Government" list, could use a morale boost. But it would take a pretty goth sensibility to be cheered up by a move to the site of what Congress established in 1855 as "St. Elizabeths Government Hospital for the Insane."

The hospital's former employees include the inventor of the "icepick lobotomy"; among its famous inmates were disgruntled federal job-seeker Charles Guiteau, who assassinated President Garfield, and pioneering recreational chemist Owsley Stanley, who supplied Ken Kesey's "merry pranksters" with high-grade LSD. "One of many historically interesting features of the site," the redevelopment webpage boasts, "is a cemetery originally established for ... 'friendless patients.'"

"It's a terrific place," Johnson told Hudson, "I am envious. But I will probably never work there." (Tough break.)

Johnson's other goal, "unity of the mission," has bigger obstacles than a dispersed workforce, as that House Homeland Security Committee hearing made clear.

"Syria has become a matter of homeland security," committee Chairman Rep. Michael McCaul, R-Texas, insisted. Judging by the other topics covered, so have "massive flood insurance premium increases"; the capture of "top drug lord El Chapo Guzman"; "conducting proper oversight over the state of New Jersey" for Sandy relief; the "human-trafficking question"; and "put[ting] pressure on [the Transportation Security Administration] to use small businesses."

More than a decade after 9/11, the Congressional Research Service observes, the federal government still "does not have a single definition for 'homeland security.'" Definitions in the government's key strategy documents range from "provid[ing] essential support to national and economic security," to ensuring a homeland safe "against terrorism and other hazards where American interests, aspirations, and ways of life can thrive." A deputy secretary quoted in the report helpfully explains that homeland security is "transactional, it's decentralized, it's bottom-driven," and it's "strategic, it's centralized, it's top-driven."

"In short," writes Wired's David Kravets, " 'homeland security' is whatever the government says it is."

Whatever it is, it's expensive. By some measures, since 9/11 spending under the rubric "homeland security," both inside and outside the department, dwarfs even the New Deal.

It's also dangerous. the department's recent, aborted attempt at building a national license plate tracking system is only the most recent example of the myriad ways the agency's "mission creep" threatens Americans' privacy.

The Times reports that Rep. Jeff Duncan, R-S.C., has urged the department to skimp on eco-friendly Brazilian hardwood and "consider composite wood material for the decking" at the headquarters. But we can do better than rearranging the decking on a titanic waste.

GENE HEALY, a Washington Examiner columnist, is vice president at the Cato Institute and author of "The Cult of the Presidency."