

Do we need the DHS?

We might well ask what the DHS is doing to further our national security.

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So House Republicans have accepted the inevitable and passed a clean bill funding the Department of Homeland Security. We always knew how this would play out. The media, congressional Democrats, and President Obama deluged us with tales of impending disaster, as if ISIS were about to wade ashore in Miami, despite the fact that, according DHS's contingency plan, 86 percent of the department's workers would be exempt from any furlough, including virtually all employees at key security agencies like customs and border protection, the Coast Guard, and the Secret Service.

On the other hand, the Republicans really had no end-game. The provision defunding the president's executive order on immigration could not pass the Senate or be signed into law, meaning that sooner or later the House Republicans had to give in. Of course, being Republicans, they had to do maximum political damage to themselves first.

But amidst all the noise and drama, there is one additional question someone might ask: Do we really need a Department of Homeland Security in the first place?

The creation of the DHS was a classic example of how Washington reacts to a crisis. In the wake of 9/11, the pressure was on Congress and the Bush administration to "do something," or at least look as if they were doing something. The result was a new Cabinet-level agency that cobbled together a host of disparate agencies, ranging from the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) to the Fish and Wildlife Service. Nearly every federal employee who wore a badge was simply swept up and dumped into the new bureaucracy. From a simple management or "span of control" perspective, lumping together so many unrelated functions is an invitation to failure.

From a national-security standpoint, the DHS is part of the problem, not the solution. After all, the agencies primarily responsible for counter-terrorism, such as the FBI, CIA, and NSA, are not part of the DHS. This, of course, hasn't stopped the DHS from developing its own counter-terrorism infrastructure. But, if one of the primary intelligence gaps before 9/11 was the failure of agencies to share information and coordinate activities, it is hard to see how more duplication and fragmentation makes things better.

Making matters worse, virtually every congressman wants to be part of protecting the homeland too. No fewer than 90 congressional committees and subcommittees oversee some aspect of the department.

With so much of Congress involved — and because no one wants to appear soft on protecting the homeland — spending has skyrocketed, tripling from \$18 billion per year in 2002 to more than \$54 billion last year. Money spreads to every congressional district without regard to actual security needs. Thus, the DHS has provided grants to such obvious terrorist targets as Bridgeport, Conn., Toledo, Ohio, and North Pole, Alaska.

Its workforce expanded from 163,000 employees in 2004 to 190,000 by 2014. And far from being efficient, the DHS is regarded as one of the most poorly managed agencies in Washington.

Government audits routinely find the DHS guilty of waste and mismanagement. The Government Accountability Office has for years included the DHS on its list of “high risk” government agencies. A 2010 National Academy of Sciences report accused the agency of failing to rigorously evaluate projects to see whether the benefits outweigh the costs. Many of the 22 agencies falling under the DHS umbrella are among the most dysfunctional in government, including FEMA, the TSA, and the Secret Service.

Morale at the department is dreadful. In October of last year, the Washington Post reviewed a new survey of 40,000 DHS employees. It found that only 42 percent of those employees are satisfied with the department, 25 percent have a positive view of their boss’s ability to “generate high levels of motivation and commitment in the workforce,” and 39 percent believe department leaders “maintain high standards of honesty and integrity.”

It is true, as we are frequently reminded, that there has not been a major terrorist attack on the U.S. homeland since 9/11, but it’s hard to attribute that to the DHS. For example, a report from the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs looked at more than 70 “fusion centers” operated by the DHS to collate information and found that they had produced virtually no useful intelligence to support federal counter-terrorism efforts. According to the committee, the intelligence forwarded by the centers was often shoddy and rarely timely, it sometimes encroached on citizens’ civil liberties and Privacy Act protections, it was occasionally taken from already-published public sources, and more often than not it was unrelated to terrorism.

None of this has stopped the DHS from trying to increase its mission, often at the expense of civil liberties. For example, through the TSA, the DHS is now partnering with local law enforcement to set up checkpoints and random auto stops to check for drugs and other contraband. Investigative reporting by the Albuquerque Journal’s Michael Coleman has found the DHS involved in investigating everything from movie piracy at theaters in Ohio to counterfeit NBA jerseys in San Antonio to pickpocket cases in Albuquerque. No doubt many of these cases are legitimate law-enforcement issues, but in those terrifying days following 9/11, did we really think we needed a giant federal agency to fight pickpockets?

Perhaps, while Republicans are busy tilting at windmills, someone might shoot for bigger game. Break up the DHS.

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