



Time to abolish DHS

By: [Gene Healy](#) | 09/26/11

Two years ago this month, the federal government broke ground on what was supposed to be a massive new headquarters for the Department of Homeland Security. Situated on the St. Elizabeths Hospital campus in Southeast Washington, the \$3.4 billion project was designed to bring together some 15,000 employees of our newest Cabinet department, which in less than a decade has become notorious for waste, mismanagement and inflicting pointless humiliation on airline travelers.

Depending on your sense of humor, you may get a mordant chuckle out of the fact that, before the government adopted the St. Elizabeths moniker in 1916, the property was known as the Government Hospital for the Insane.

DHS' headquarters project hit a speed bump recently when the House voted to eliminate funding for the project.

That's a start, but in a new study, my Cato Institute colleague David Rittgers makes a provocative and compelling argument for going much further. He argues that, 10 years after the Sept. 11 attacks, it's time to abolish the Department of Homeland Security.

Rittgers sees particular danger in DHS' grant programs, under which the department has ladled out some \$34 billion to states and localities since its inception.

The talismanic properties of the phrase "homeland security" enable politicians "to wrap pork in red, white and blue in a way not possible with defense spending," Rittgers argues. "Not every town can host a military installation or build warships, but every town has a police force that can use counterterrorism funds." As a result of the "gold-rush pathology" encouraged by the grants -- to offer just one example -- the midsize town of Grand Forks, N.D., now "has more biochemical suits and gas masks than police officers to wear them."

The issue isn't simply waste. DHS largess often threatens civil liberties and privacy in ways that garden-variety pork does not.

Over the past decade, homeland security grants have been used in an apparent attempt to turn Main Street America into a London-style Panopticon, funding security cameras in sleepy hamlets nationwide. And, as investigative journalist Radley Balko notes, DHS handouts also further a burgeoning culture of police paramilitarization, funding armored personnel carriers for such "unlikely terrorist targets" as the towns of Adrian, Mich., and Germantown, Tenn.

All this has done very little to enhance public safety -- not that you'd learn that from the agency itself, which is especially resistant to using cost-benefit analysis. In 2006, a senior economist at DHS admitted, "We really don't know a whole lot about the overall costs and benefits of homeland security."

In a new book, "Terror, Security, and Money," professors John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart closely examine that question and, using a set of assumptions weighted in favor of the government, conclude that, to justify the increased post-Sept. 11 spending, we "would have to deter, prevent, foil, or protect against 1,667 otherwise successful [attempted Times Square car bomb-type] attacks per year, or more than four per day."

As Rittgers points out, abolishing DHS doesn't mean ending legitimate federal counterterrorism functions -- it means undoing a giant, costly government reorganization that left us no safer and considerably less free. Some of the department's component parts would return to their parent agencies. Others would be shuttered or privatized.

Until recently, it seemed as if appropriations labeled "homeland security" would join "defense" as a budgetary sacred cow. The House GOP's "Pledge to America" took DHS dollars out of its proposed freeze on "non-security spending." That may be changing, however, as shown by Congress' willingness to hold up the agency's headquarters expansion.

On the principle of last hired, first fired, if we're going to start downsizing the Cabinet, there's a lot to be said for starting with the most recent addition.