



## Homeland Security's Unhappy Anniversary

*Security theater aside, just what is the decade-old DHS good for?*

By KELLEY VLAHOS - December 5, 2012

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Two summers ago, I was bumping along in a golf cart with two rather amiable staff from the Department of Homeland Security. We were traversing the 176-acre property of what used to be the grounds of a mental asylum. After billions of dollars in taxpayer money, it would eventually become a sprawling, state-of-the-art headquarters for the Department of Homeland Security, the largest federal complex since the Pentagon was built in 1943 and the third-largest cabinet level department after the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

With flashlights in hand, we toured the forbiddingly decrepit 19th Century main hall, once the flagship administrative offices/patient dormitories of St. Elizabeth's Hospital in southeast Washington, D.C., where poet Ezra Pound was once incarcerated (for treason), and Charles J. Guiteau, who assassinated President James Garfield, was housed until his execution in 1882.

I was told that this building, the size of two football fields, would be the DHS Secretary's offices. Just the secretary's staff, along with assorted conference rooms, and a cafeteria. The remaining 14 buildings planned as part of the \$3.6 billion project would eventually house 14,000 employees from DHS's 22 sub-components, including the U.S. Secret Service, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Customs and Border Patrol, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the U.S Coast Guard.

The notion of transforming this property—where a family of deer still roamed and a Civil War burial ground loomed on the hillside—into 4.5 million gross square feet of usable office space overlooking the confluence of the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers—was dizzying to me, especially the idea of a fortress-like structure for the secretary's staff. When I asked my handlers about it, they shrugged.

As Rep. Ron Paul told me in an interview about the 10-year anniversary of DHS last month, bureaucracies don't go away, they just "tend to get bigger and bigger." DHS may be the greatest modern example.

On November 25, 2002, President George W. Bush signed the Homeland Security Act of 2002, which paved the way for the greatest reorganization of the federal government in 50 years, bringing together several law enforcement, transportation security, border patrol, immigration and disaster response agencies under the DHS umbrella. The consensus was that a serious lack of information sharing and cooperation among these departments had led to the government's inability to prevent the attacks on 9/11.

“We had no choice,” outgoing Sen. Joseph Lieberman (I-CT), who played a critical role in DHS’s creation in 2002, explained to an audience at George Washington University on Nov. 28. “The status quo enabled the attacks on 9/11. Our government simply needed to change quickly and dramatically and the Department of Homeland Security was one big and significant step in that direction.”

Whether or not this was a positive step is the subject of wide-ranging debate. First, neither the CIA nor the FBI were brought under the DHS rubric, ensuring new stove-piping and natural competition from the outset, despite all the talk about “cohesion” and “coordination.”

Second, the oversight situation is absurd. More than 100 congressional committees and subcommittees claim jurisdiction over DHS, which means the department has to report and respond to each of them, all the time, about whatever it is doing.

This has led to not only a drain on resources but competing messages, tasks, and believe it or not, less accountability. “The lack of congressional action” on this oversight issue “has become a joke,” the Heritage Foundation conceded in 2010.

The DHS also suffers from a pervasive lack of respect. “I don’t think people understand what (DHS) does and no part of it wins any respect from the public,” perhaps with the exception of the Coast Guard, Ben Friedman of the Cato Institute tells TAC. “It’s hard for me to know what the administration of DHS has accomplished other than making policy choices and steering the ship. It doesn’t seem to me that there’s been much improvement.”

Of course that assessment changes depending who you ask. On a panel discussion sponsored by the American Constitution Society for Law and Policy and the Open Society Foundations on Nov. 28, one DHS official claimed the department was doing just fine—for its age. When I talked to Jim Carafano of the Heritage Foundation, he acknowledged the oversight problems, but was pessimistic about a better solution for homeland security coordination. “The horse is already out of the barn,” he said.

As more critical voices have pointed out, the horse is not only out of the barn, but it’s wreaking havoc, and frankly, has proven to be a very costly animal. “Basically, before 9/11, all this stuff existed already and so we just used a fire hose to give more money to it,” said Friedman, who called the result, a “bureaucratic monstrosity.”

DHS’s brief history is littered with poor choices, persistently low employee morale, and a lot of waste. Just last week, Pro Publica reported that after years of promoting a mission to improve communication among federal agencies, most of its employees are still unable to use their \$430 million interoperable radio system.

Those radios may end up joining the \$184 million in unused airport scanners that are apparently gathering dust in a warehouse, right next to the abandoned \$30 million “puffers,” part of a misbegotten scheme to elicit the presence of explosive material from passengers’ bodies as they pass through airport security checkpoints.

TSA has come under fire for more than just its flash-in-the-pan gizmos. Airport security has become a gauntlet which many Americans now dread. “What a choice we have,”

noted outgoing Congressman Paul, who was one of the few Republicans who actually voted against the creation of DHS in 2002. “We can either not fly, or we have the choice of being groped or going through an x-ray machine” that renders near naked pictures of your body and blasts you with potentially harmful radiation, he lamented.

TSA says it is moving toward a more “risk based” approach, but so far, most people traveling this holiday season won’t notice. Viral videos of small children and grandmothers enduring pat-downs have done nothing to improve the agency’s image. Nor has the numerous reports that indicate that real contraband, including explosive material, continue to get through the security screening process.

Meanwhile, it turns out that DHS’s 77 fusion centers, which have swallowed upwards of \$1.4 billion (no one quite knows how much they’ve cost, which is alarming in itself), are not only ineffective, but are engaging in unconstitutional surveillance of U.S citizens. They were supposed to integrate counter-terrorism efforts among local, state, and federal entities nationwide. Instead they’ve been a giant boondoggle, or as The Washington Post paraphrased a recent senate report: “pools of ineptitude, waste and civil liberties intrusions.”

This of course, may be the biggest and most egregious example, but it is not the first. Hundreds of millions were wasted in the Coast Guard’s failed “Deepwater” re-capitalization program. Thanks to poor oversight, mismanagement and shoddy, cheap contractor work, ships were designed that were so dangerously incapable in one case, that they had to be decommissioned before they were even deployed

The same problems were also blamed for the multi-billion dollar SBINet catastrophe. This effort was supposed to build a “virtual fence” along the country’s 6,000-mile border. Again, taxpayer dollars were wasted over many years on a project that was never fully implemented. “It was based on hopes, dreams and fantasy,” noted a scathing report by the Center for International Policy.

The biggest problem with DHS is it’s barreled forward with expensive projects that are never assessed for their effectiveness or even need. That means throwing a lot of money at greedy contractors who promised the world and in many cases, just couldn’t deliver. In 2008, a congressional report examined \$15 billion worth of failed contracts under DHS auspices.

That’s not to say all of DHS’s endeavors have tanked (the Government Accountability Office offered this gracious assessment a year ago), but it does raise the question of whether the individual agencies — e.g., FEMA, TSA — could have pursued the same goals without the added personnel and red tape.

This swelling bureaucracy is no less manifested than in the massive headquarters construction taking place above the city today. But relative austerity is staying its hand, for now. The budget has slowed considerably, and timetables protracted since my visit in 2010.

But thousands of Coast Guard employees are expected to move into their brand new facility (pictures here) on the property this summer. It will be interesting to see if they will be joined by other DHS components, or left alone for now, with the deer and the ghosts of St. Elizabeth’s Hospital.

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