



OPINION: It's time to put Dept. of Homeland Security out of its misery

DHS is bloated, byzantine and a little bit creepy

By Dick Meyer

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WASHINGTON, D.C. - Let's not pussy foot around: It is time to get rid of the Department of Homeland Security.

I am not aware of anyone who has taken a close look at the agency and concluded it is doing a good job – or even a decent job. It's a \$40 billion a year blooper.

The latest indictment comes from a long report by The Washington Post that focused on the agency's personnel issues. "Toxic culture" was a key phrase around the agency. Turnover at DHS over the past four years is twice the government as a whole; DHS ranked dead last in a recent survey "Best Places to work in the Federal Government"; the terrorism intelligence unit has had six chiefs during the Obama administration.

Jeh Johnson, the new secretary, says he has already fixed most of these problems. Perhaps. But the deep problems aren't fixable.

First off, the agency is too big and composed of too many disparate parts to be well managed.

"DHS has too many subdivisions in too many disparate fields to operate effectively," a study by the libertarian CATO Institute concluded. "Americans are not safer because the head of DHS is simultaneously responsible for airport security and governmental efforts to counter potential flu epidemics."

These are just a few of the agencies that were scooped into DHS: FEMA, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Office of Cybersecurity, the U.S. Coast Guard, the U.S. Secret Service and the former Plum Island Animal Disease Center. Oh yes, and the Transportation Security Agency--every citizen's firsthand source of evidence that something is seriously screwy in the world of homeland security.

The original creation of DHS was a panicky, bureaucratic Pamper mission by the feds (a Pamper mission is a semi-technical phrase for organization rear-end covering) in response to 9/11. The actual physical risks of terrorism to Americans were and still are greatly exaggerated. Indeed, it is considered almost un-American to look at the risk of terrorism through the lens of cost-benefit analysis, as we do every other risk.

This blind, political subservience to the poorly named War on Terror has justified too many compromises of our privacy and civil rights already. The vast, clumsy DHS bureaucracy further institutionalizes that mindset. Americans looked the other way for too long. President Obama looked the other way for too long.

It would be fine penance for the president to get rid of the bureaucratic legacy of the worst elements of our national response to 9/11. It would probably also be good management. DHS could be broken up into smaller agencies more logically by mission. That should yield more focused and nimble management and oversight. And it could be a model for future reform in other parts of the government.