

[Click to Print](#)[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Columnists

[\[Print\]](#) [\[Email\]](#)

Gene Healy: Abolish the DHS

By: [Gene Healy](#)
Examiner Columnist
August 25, 2009

Does "time with my family" ever actually mean "time with my family" in Washington? Tom Ridge gave the standard resignation line when he stepped down as Secretary of Homeland Security shortly after the 2004 elections, but last week he revealed that there was much more to the story.

In a forthcoming book, Ridge complains that the weekend before Election Day, Bush administration officials leaned on him to raise the color-coded threat level. Dismayed, Ridge refused the demand, and concluded he needed to resign. "I wondered," Ridge writes, "Is this about security or politics?"

That's a question we ought to ask about DHS as a whole. Since its creation in 2003, the department has done little to provide genuine security and much to encourage a pernicious politics of fear. We'd be better off without it.

The Homeland Security Advisory System is a case in point. Even before Ridge's revelation, two separate studies showed that Bush received a boost to his approval ratings with each escalation of the terror threat level. The warning has been raised above yellow ("elevated") 16 times, but it's never been lowered to blue or green, the bottom rungs on DHS's Ladder of Fear. Yet, with Spinal Tap logic ("this goes to 11!") the department insists on keeping all five levels.

The department itself is a dog's breakfast of 22 federal agencies brought together in the hope of providing better coordination on a common mission. But turf battles left key antiterror agencies like the FBI out of the reorganization, and DHS finished last or next to last on every measure of employee morale in a 2006 Office of Personnel Management study.

The truth, as analyst Jeffrey Rosen points out, is that DHS is 'an institutional money pit that has more to do with symbols than substance.' Indeed, a congressional investigation in 2008 documented some \$15 billion in failed contracts that have run wildly over budget or been cancelled before completion.

Many of the contracts that DHS considers a success have funded a growing federal assault on privacy. The fishing village of Dillingham, AK (pop. 2,400), is too small for a streetlight, but thanks to a homeland security grant, it now has 80 surveillance cameras.

The town of Ridgely, MD (pop. 1,400), got a grant for cameras as well. "It was difficult to be able to find

something to use the money for," said Ridgely's police chief, but "if you don't ask, you aren't going to get a thing."

Other homeland security grants have gone toward the development of the Transportation Security Administration's "nude scanner," which should add a whole new level of indignity to the airport security line experience, in which we're already poked and prodded, and warned not to joke about the poking.

True enough, even if DHS were abolished, it wouldn't make government much smaller. Most of the department's 200,000 employees work for agencies--Customs, the Coast Guard, INS--that would survive DHS's closure. (Though we could at least stop work on the hideous, 38-acre, \$4 billion Nebraska Avenue Complex currently being built in Southeast DC).

Shuttering DHS would be largely symbolic; but symbolism matters. Down to its very name--an "abhorrently un-American, odiously Teutono/Soviet term," in the words of James Fallows--the Department of Homeland Security has stood for bureaucratic centralization in an atmosphere of permanent crisis.

In this season of angry town hall meetings, liberals have taken to defending the recent overwrought DHS memo warning about "Rightwing Extremism." But for all his faults, "No Drama" Obama has resisted the temptation to boost his popularity by stoking domestic terror fears or goosing the threat level. But, as his popularity falls, that option may look increasingly attractive.


In July, DHS secretary Janet Napolitano announced the formation of a bipartisan commission to review the terror alert system, perhaps seeking political cover to scrap it in its current form. That's good news. But one wishes Congress had the political will to scrap the department as a whole.

Once upon a time, some 15 years ago, "reform" meant trying to get rid of useless, liberty-threatening cabinet departments. If the GOP ever recovers that spirit, they could do worse than starting with the DHS.

Examiner columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

Find this article at:

<http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/columns/54597757.html>

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.