



10 years of DHS: Blessing or 'bureaucratic monstrosity'?

By: Kelley Vlahos - December 08, 2012

Ten years after its creation, the Department of Homeland Security continues to push against a mixed record of accomplishments and setbacks, and a mission that experts say is still hard to pin down.

"I don't think people understand what (DHS) does and no part of it really wins any respect from the public," charged Ben Friedman, a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the Cato Institute in Washington.

Washington marked the 10-year "anniversary" of the department's inception late last month. The occasion came with a clamor of criticism from the agency's stalwart detractors, but also claims that DHS is finding its footing.

Friedman lamented that the "outbreak of fear after 9/11" led to the creation of "this bureaucratic monstrosity."

But James Carafano, national security expert for the Heritage Foundation, said "people need to put things in perspective. We still have issues with the (Pentagon) and it's been around for a half a century. Compare it to where the (DHS) is today, and it doesn't look that bad."

Then-President George W. Bush signed legislation on Nov. 25, 2002, that launched the cabinet-level agency, which acts as an umbrella over 22 government "components" including the U.S. Secret Service, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Border Patrol, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the U.S. Coast Guard.

DHS, currently led by Secretary Janet Napolitano, is now the third-largest cabinet level department next to the Veterans Administration and the Department of Defense, and oversees a \$46 billion annual budget and some 230,000 employees.

Currently, construction is underway to establish a new \$3.4 billion headquarters to house the entire DHS family at the vast, but dilapidated, St. Elizabeth's Hospital complex in southeast Washington, D.C. It's cost the taxpayer more than \$1.2 billion since 2004,

though funding has been slashed in the fiscal 2013 budget request. The Coast Guard is set to move into their new digs on the property this August. But while the public may have heard very little about the new headquarters, problems at the head office, as well as among its component parts, are well-known.

"They spend all of our money and violate our civil liberties -- otherwise it's a great organization," joked former presidential candidate and retiring Rep. Ron Paul, R-Texas, in an interview with Fox News.

"I voted against it (in 2002), I never believed in it," he said, referring to the passage of the Homeland Security Act, which led to the opening of DHS a year later.

After 9/11, advocates believed the new agency was needed to bring together key players in intelligence, law enforcement, disaster response and transportation security for better information-sharing and cooperation.

"It wasn't easy -- it was quite a battle," noted Sen. Joseph Lieberman, I-Conn., in a Nov. 28 speech commemorating the 10-year anniversary, and his own retirement from office this year. Lieberman was critical in establishing DHS, and has remained a constant advocate in his role as chairman of the Senate Governmental Affairs and Homeland Security Committee.

"These agencies were not working together. I believe, overall, (DHS) has been a success and immeasurably contributed to our security," he said. "We had no choice. 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."

That step might have been hindered by a lot of stumbling in the wrong direction, critics say.

In 2005, FEMA was roundly criticized for its response to victims in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Many said it was the first test of DHS's ability to coordinate disaster response, and it largely failed. The saga continues -- just recently, victims of both Katrina and Hurricane Rita in Florida won a \$42.6 million settlement against companies that designed and built trailers for FEMA that turned out to be emitting toxic fumes.

In early 2011, DHS completely scrapped a five-year, \$6.7 billion surveillance technology initiative or "virtual fence," to secure 6,000 miles of the American border. SBInet, part of the Secure Borders Initiative, was widely considered an embarrassment, and blamed on bad strategy and poor oversight of the private contractors involved.

Last year, the Coast Guard largely conceded that its own five-year, \$24 billion effort to modernize and grow its fleet, otherwise known as "Deepwater," was virtually sunk. In one example, a \$100 million project to transform eight aging boats into modern patrol vessels turned out to be a wreck, with the new ships eventually abandoned for re-commissioning.

The Secret Service, another component of DHS, has also come under fire for the behavior of its agents while on assignment. Agents stirred international controversy after bringing prostitutes back to their hotel while on assignment in Colombia; even before that, agents earned a reputation for partying while posted to Martha's Vineyard during the president's vacation.

Possibly the least popular arm of DHS is the TSA, which was created after 9/11 and shifted into DHS in 2003. Its workers have been accused of incompetence after several internal reports over the years found that screeners had mistakenly allowed contraband, including explosive material, through checkpoints.

Meanwhile, civil liberties advocates have decried passenger screening as intrusive, most recently with the move to "full body screeners" that render near naked X-ray images of flyers. Videos of elderly persons and children apparently being manhandled by TSA workers have gone viral in recent years, sparking debate against "pat-downs" and one-size-fits-all security requirements.

Shortly after President Obama took office, DHS also was forced to retract a report that suggested veterans and right-wing activists could be candidates for homegrown extremist groups.

And in October, a bipartisan Senate investigation found that DHS's fusion centers -- a nationwide network of offices through which all levels of law enforcement and government can share information about potential terrorist activity -- did little to track or disrupt terrorist threats and cost as much as \$1.4 billion in federal taxpayer support between 2003 and 2011.

Homeland Security claimed the report was outdated and inaccurate, and ignored benefits to local governments from their involvement with federal intelligence officials.

A DHS spokesperson, in response to questions from FoxNews.com, claimed that over the last 10 years the department and its agencies have "matured," to be able to take on everything from cyberthreats to natural disasters.

"DHS has become smarter about the threats we face and how to confront them by moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach towards a targeted and more effective risk-based approach," the spokesperson said, pointing to multiple layers of security in the nation's aviation system, as well as improvements in border and port security.

Seth Grossman, deputy general counsel for DHS, speaking at a Washington panel Nov. 28, suggested that despite bumps along the road, DHS was learning from its mistakes and responding accordingly. "(DHS) is relatively new. As far as agencies go, it is very recent," he said. "We're trying to move away from the one fix-it-all solution."

Other advocates told Fox News that one of the best things DHS has done was coordinate disaster response more effectively. One example is the earthquake aftermath in Haiti, where the Coast Guard worked jointly with FEMA and other U.S. agencies in a timely humanitarian and search-and-rescue effort.

When asked whether the government might be better off without DHS, Carafano told Fox News, "there are things they could be doing better ... but for everything you may make better (by getting rid of DHS), you would incur some other cost elsewhere. Someone would really have to come up with a much better argument for transitioning to another model."

Carafano agreed that oversight has been a serious problem -- right now some 100 congressional committees and subcommittees say they have a piece of the action where DHS is concerned.

This has created a lot of bureaucratic nonsense that has ultimately hurt progress, he said. Ultimately, Rep. Paul says DHS is likely here to stay. "They might tinker around the edges or something. But once you create (bureaucracies) they tend to just get bigger and bigger."

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