
DHS Report Card: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

RANDALL LARSEN

Earlier this year the House Committee on Homeland Security issued a report card on the department it oversees.

As the co-host of my radio show said when introducing Congressman Bennie Thompson (D-MS), the Chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee and the report card's author, "This is not a report card I would want to take home to mama."

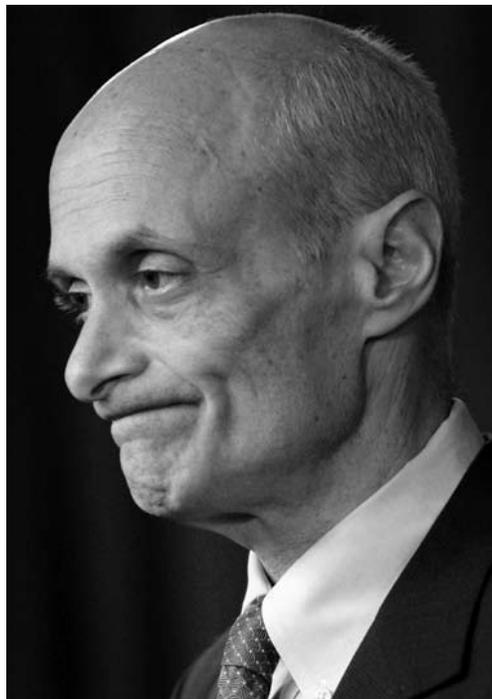
Indeed, there were many valid criticisms within this report. On the other hand, we haven't been attacked on our homeland since 2001, and the Administration says we must be doing something (or a lot of things) right. So where is the truth? Are America's taxpayers getting a solid return on investment for the \$35 billion we spend each year on the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the third largest federal agency?

On an absolute scale, I'd give the Department a D+. On a curve, factoring in those elements for which the Department leadership has no control (and I am not talking about al Qaeda), I give them a C. This is the DHS grade for today — not an assessment of its first 53 months.

My former students will point out that I never graded on a curve, so why should I consider it now when we are talking about the security of our families and nation?

To be fair, though, the horribly

flawed and secretive process that created this department of 26 different organizations guaranteed a decade-long maturation process. The Administration did not consult with a single member of the bipartisan Hart-Rudman Commission regarding the establishment of this new department,



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even though the distinguished commissioners had studied the concept for three years and created the original DHS blueprint.

Additionally, Congress is equally culpable for their constant meddling (such as another initiative to move FEMA) and failure to properly reorganize itself as recommended by the bipartisan 9/11 Commission. At last count there were 83 committees and subcommittees providing "oversight," and DHS officials had given four times as many testimonies as the Defense Department, despite the fact that DHS is less than 1/12 the size. So oversight in this case primarily refers to the oversight of special interests and is a huge distraction.

The Good.

The two best aspects of the Department are Secretary Michael Chertoff and Kip Hawley, the head of the Transportation Safety Administration. With few exceptions, they have established the proper priorities.

Chertoff understands the folly of overreactions to small-scale threats, the absolute requirement to focus on the catastrophic threats (the ones that could forever change the nation), and the need to allocate funds accordingly.

Hawley was lambasted by both the media and Congress when he first took office and announced that we would have TSA personnel focus less on pen knives and knitting needles, and more on carry-on bombs. That was one year before al Qaeda attempted to put liquid bombs on ten airliners headed to the U.S. We need visionary leaders who keep us two

steps ahead of the bad guys instead of one step behind.

Secretary Chertoff understands that “feel good initiatives,” such as 100 percent screening of all shipping containers, are a waste of resources with little likelihood of preventing a nuke from entering the U.S. (The best way to get a nuke into the U.S. would be to charter a Gulfstream V or Boeing Business Jet and file a flight plan directly to the target city.) As for other weapons, the al Qaeda online manuals suggest terrorists make them inside the countries where they will use them, just as they did in Indonesia, Turkey, Morocco, Spain and the United Kingdom.

The Secretary also places a very high priority on creating a trustworthy identification system — called Real ID. He cannot understand why some people worry that an effective ID system is more of a threat to privacy than the one we have today that allows any reasonably intelligent teenager to steal your identity.

Finally, Chertoff put together an incredible legislative package for immigration reform — an initiative endorsed by a bipartisan coalition including Senators Kennedy, Kyl, Graham and Lieberman. Unfortunately, it was defeated by the vocal minority.

The Bad.

From a strategic perspective, one of the most significant deficiencies that has plagued the department since day one is the tendency to ask the wrong questions, none more notable than, “How do we protect our critical infrastructure?” This leads to answers focused on gates, guns, guards and gadgets. The proper question is, “How do we ensure critical services?” The issue is not protecting water treatment plants. Rather, it is about ensuring safe drinking water. Resilience is more important than security. We can’t protect everything, but we must improve the ability to mitigate effects and quickly reconstitute.

Another troubling issue in DHS

is human resources. Not only does it have the lowest rated morale within the federal bureaucracy, it is also incredibly bloated with political appointees — far more per capita than any other — and yet it can’t fill many senior civil servant positions. This will be particularly disruptive during the last few months of this Administration and the first six of the next — a true window of vulnerability. All federal agencies face transition challenges between administrations, but none like the ones DHS will face. There are also too many contractors and too few career government employees, and decision-making processes are still weak. The department must place a top priority on recruiting career civil servants at all levels to augment the talented but overworked force currently in place.

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The Ugly.

The real grade that Americans should worry about, however, is not for DHS, but for homeland security writ large. The Department is just one of many players at the federal level, and the majority of homeland security takes place at the local level. 9-1-1 will always be a local call. The feds have major responsibility for catastrophic events, such as preventing and responding to nukes and preparation for response and recovery from a biological attack, but the vast majority of homeland security is in the hands of state and local government.

Unfortunately, the ugly fact about the nuclear threat is that we only spend about \$1 billion a year

to locate, lockdown and eliminate nuclear materials that terrorists could use to build a Hiroshima style bomb. (By contrast, we are spending roughly that same amount every four days in Iraq). Moreover, the bipartisan Robb-Silberman Commission stated that intelligence collection on loose nukes is not a high priority for the U.S. government. Can anyone please tell me what could be a higher priority? Furthermore, no one is in charge of protecting America from the most serious threat we will face in the 21st century — bioterrorism. A recent DHS report clearly identified this growing threat, but is anyone listening? I would sleep better at night if someone were in charge of biodefense. A study by the Center for Biosecurity-UPMC stated there are 26 Presidentially-appointed, Senate-confirmed individuals with biodefense responsibilities, but no one is in charge, and nearly six years after the anthrax incident of 2001, America still has no anthrax response plan.

Finally, information sharing and joint exercising — between federal, state and local agencies, and between public and private organizations — has seen too little improvement since 9/11, meaning we may see more of the chaos we saw after Katrina.

How do we fix these problems? Unfortunately, a severely weakened Administration, a Congress hopelessly adrift in partisan squabbling and positioning for the 2008 election, and the budgetary demands of the war in Iraq portend little or no improvement for the next 18 months — not a report card I would want to take home to mama. **RF**

Colonel Randall Larsen, USAF (Ret) is the Director of the Institute for Homeland Security, co-host of public radio’s Homeland Security: Inside and Out, and the author of Our Own Worst Enemy: Asking the Right Questions About Security to Protect You, Your Family, and America (Grand Central Publishing).