

Plan to Shield Nation Needs Help

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President George W. Bush's surprise announcement that he now favors a large new Department of Homeland Security reflects his realization that the administration's original organizational response to the Sept. 11 attacks was not working.

For months, pundits, politicians and the press have depicted Bush's White House homeland security aide, Tom Ridge, as lacking sufficient authority to do the job. The new department, which will combine some two dozen widely dispersed agencies, is meant to rectify this situation.

The president's proposal is impressively ambitious. It includes just about every agency and function that could reasonably be brought into the new entity. A single department will now be responsible for protecting our borders and critical infrastructure, preventing and preparing for terrorists' using weapons of mass destruction, analyzing and assessing future threats, and mitigating the direct and indirect consequences of any future attack.

Congress will no doubt change some of the specifics. But there is every reason to believe that, well before year's end, the president will get a bill providing essentially what he has requested.

A Department of Homeland Security could ameliorate some important current shortcomings. The merger of border security functions is particularly important and worthwhile. Integrating threat assessment and analysis in a single office also makes sense, especially if the CIA and FBI provide the department with all the raw intelligence data necessary to ensure effective analysis.

But as we move down this path it is important to avoid falling into the trap of believing that reorganization, even one as ambitious as the president proposes, will solve the homeland security problem. It won't. The Department of Energy was created in 1977 - and we still do not have a clear energy policy.

There are at least three urgent needs today: minding the homeland security store while the legislation is pending, making the department effective once it is established, and coordinating its activities with those that necessarily fall outside its jurisdiction.

Tom Ridge has been designated to take the administration's case to Capitol Hill and the airwaves. But what in the meantime will happen to his day job - which is to lead, coordinate and mobilize the U.S. government in the effort to secure our homeland against attack? That job cannot be delegated to anyone else. If Ridge is going to focus on the legislative campaign, perhaps another person should be appointed to head the Office of Homeland Security in the White House.

Particularly important is the setting of priorities. Nine months after Sept. 11 we are still waiting for a clear homeland security strategy from the administration, the development of which is one of Ridge's top priorities. Rather than putting the reorganization cart before the strategy horse, would it not have been better to decide the strategy and reorganize accordingly? In any case, the need for strategy remains.

A second urgent need will be to make, once established, the new department effective. How, for example, are the now-separate border agencies to be integrated? How will the new threat analysis unit be structured so as to work smoothly with the new FBI office established to perform a similar task? These and other knotty practical problems will require strong senior leadership and tough management decisions.

Last but not least, the department's activities will have to be linked with the remainder of Washington's homeland security functions. Although offices from eight out of the 13 federal departments are being brought in, many of the most critical functions are (necessarily) being left out. The FBI and CIA will remain outside the department. The National Guard will continue to report to the Pentagon. Many of the key bioterrorism response and prevention efforts will continue to be part of Health and Human Services. In all, by the administration's own count, more than three-quarters of the agencies involved in homeland security today will remain outside the new department.

It will therefore be critically important to maintain, indeed to enhance, the coordinating role of the White House Office of Homeland Security - for example, by giving it and its director statutory authority over the homeland security budget. One of the most important, but trickiest challenges for the president will be to work out the precise division of authority between his new secretary of homeland security and his director for homeland security.

The former needs to be the primary implementer of policy under his purview. But the director will be key to ensuring homeland security policy, strategy, budgets and operations are fully integrated and coordinated across the entire government.

In proposing a new Homeland Security Department, President Bush has done the easy part. Now it is up to him, his administration and Congress to work together to ensure that the creation of a new department will add to rather than subtract from the national effort to make our country more secure.

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