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Reorganize efforts to secure homeland

By Ivo H. Daalder and I. M. Destler

WASHINGTON -- These are tough times for President Bush's director of homeland security, Tom Ridge.

Seven months into his assignment to coordinate the myriad homeland security-related government agencies and develop a national strategy for it, *The New York Times* labels him "a White House adviser with a shrinking mandate." Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Robert Byrd, a West Virginia Democrat, decries the refusal of "the single figure ... privy to the whole picture" to testify before Congress in support of the administration's homeland security budget. And a bipartisan group led by Democratic Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut has introduced a bill that would replace Mr. Ridge's operation with a Department of Homeland Security and a White House office modeled on that of the current "drug czar."

In fact, as Mark Twain said about Wagner, the Bush administration's homeland security music has been "better than it sounds." And most proposed alternatives would be worse. But the president must act quickly, or Mr. Ridge's credibility and effectiveness will continue to decline.

A new department is not an effective solution. We could erect a new building on Constitution Avenue embossed with a shining new agency seal, but the most important functions and agencies would remain outside its walls. The FBI and the Justice Department would be left out, as would the CIA and the rest of the intelligence community. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, crucial for countering bioterrorism, would remain in the Department of Health and Human Services, and critical supporting elements would stay in the Defense Department. So even with a new department, coordination across agencies would remain the dominant need.

By contrast, the Ridge operation is well structured to meet this need, as he also directs a new Homeland Security Council, designed to mobilize a government-wide effort. But experience to date has uncovered weaknesses, both inside the administration and in relations with Congress.

Despite his significant and successful effort to pull together an integrated homeland security budget for Congress, Mr. Ridge has refused to appear on Capitol Hill to defend the request of \$38 billion in open testimony. The resulting impasse between the White House and Congress has been an unnecessary -- and costly -- distraction. It has also undermined Mr. Ridge's credibility on both sides of the aisle.

He also has lost important ground inside the administration.

Even though he was responsible for developing a new color-coded alert system, it was the attorney general, rather than Mr. Ridge, who was put in charge of deciding whether to raise or lower alert levels. And after publicly and privately championing the creation of an independent border agency, Mr. Ridge had to settle for a much more modest reform involving the merger of the Customs Service and Border Patrol within the Justice Department.

To bolster Mr. Ridge's position and enhance his credibility, the president should propose, and Congress should enact, a law giving him, his office and the Homeland Security Council statutory authority.

As a Cabinet-level official parallel to the director of the Office of Management and Budget, appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate, Mr. Ridge would be in a much better position to lead the U.S. government in forging a coherent homeland security strategy, to coordinate the many agencies and to mobilize the resources and motivate the people who work on the front lines protecting our country from terrorist attack.

Finally, the consolidation of dispersed responsibilities for securing our borders is long overdue.

Today, six departments -- from Defense to Justice, from Treasury to Transportation -- bear some responsibility for monitoring our borders. But for none of them is this crucial task a priority. This must change.

A new federal border agency must be created by merging the Coast Guard, the Customs Service, the enforcement arm of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the new airport security agency and perhaps also the State Department's consular affairs functions into one. To secure our borders, we clearly need a single agency, with one face and one overriding responsibility.

These reforms cannot produce increased security. But as Dwight D. Eisenhower said, although "organization cannot make a genius out of an incompetent .. disorganization can scarcely fail to result in inefficiency and can easily lead to disaster."

Organizational reform is the first step to avoiding such a disaster.

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