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Summary

In response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, President Bush has created the Office of Homeland Security. A better step would be to refocus the attention of the Department of Defense on defense.

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“The decision to create a cabinet-level Office of Homeland Security raises an obvious question. What is the Department of Defense protecting, if not America’s homeland?”

Defending whom?

By Doug Bandow

The superficial appeal of President George W. Bush’s decision to create a cabinet-level Office of Homeland Security is obvious: America is vulnerable. But this step raises an equally obvious question. What is the Department of Defense protecting, if not America’s homeland? The devastating terrorist attacks of September 11 demonstrated that the United States is open to attack. But a “coordinator,” even with the political skill of Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge, is unlikely to do much without statutory authority, just like the so-called Drug Czar. Yet creating another formal bureaucracy carries dangers of its own.

As the writer Randolph Bourne once observed, “War is the health of the state.” Supposedly, powers temporarily granted during emergencies frequently persist long afterward. Here, as elsewhere, the president and Congress should let the panic spawned by the terrorist attack fade, rather than act in haste. Otherwise, Americans might find themselves stuck with a new agency that is ineffective, but intrusive, pointless, but expensive.

Even more fundamental, however, is the question: Why is a new bureaucracy needed? After all, shouldn’t the Department of Defense be defending America’s homeland? Theoretically, the Pentagon is deterring traditional foreign military threats. Yet much of what the U.S. armed forces do has nothing to do with protecting Americans—which is one reason why the United States was ill-prepared for the terrorist strikes and why terrorists want to attack America.

Despite charges of declining military strength, the United States is a colossus without peer. America accounts for one-third of the world’s military outlays, spends as much as the next seven countries combined, and is allied with all of the globe’s major industrialized states. No state offers a conventional match. Only Russia has a significant nuclear force capable of devastating the United States. The Chinese arsenal will grow and smaller nations might eventually develop limited nuclear capabilities, but Washington is well able to guard against such threats, especially if it deploys a meaningful missile defense.

With so few genuine threats against which to guard, the Pentagon has focused on other tasks: protecting populous and prosperous allies throughout Asia and Europe against phantom perils; endlessly, but ineffectively, striking at old en-

emies, such as Iraq; attempting to settle other nations' civil wars, as in Kosovo; and propping up artificial countries, like Bosnia.

None of these have much to do with guarding America. There are troops in Europe, but no Red Army to contain. There are soldiers policing the Balkans, a region of interest to Europe, but not America. There are forces throughout East Asia, even though the Soviet Union is gone, North Korea is fading and China remains far behind.

The United States attacks Iraq to protect Kurds, while abetting Turkey, which attacks Kurds. This globally interventionist foreign policy is obviously burdensome and expensive. Moreover, it has drawn attention away from real homeland defense. Instead of configuring the military to eliminate an illusive enemy that just hit two American cities, the Pentagon worries about defending its traditional ally, South Korea, which possesses 40 times the GDP and twice the population of its bankrupt adversary, North Korea—which itself has no capacity to threaten America.

Moreover, the attempt to play global social engineer has created many enemies who, sadly, are able and willing to attack America. Backing Israel against the Palestinians, seeking to enforce a broken peace against Iraq 10 years on, allying with Saudi Arabia, supporting various ethnic groups, governments, and guerrilla forces in the Balkans, and supporting a weak Colombian regime against drug dealers and communist insurgents all thrust the United States into violent, hate-filled conflicts.

Gov. Ridge will find much work to do: preparing disaster response plans, coordinating federal intelligence and security efforts, and making sense of 40-plus agencies with related programs. But we would be far safer if only the Pentagon devoted more of its attention to homeland defense. We need fewer army divisions designed for a NATO-Warsaw Pact confrontation—and more special forces trained to find and kill terrorists in distant lands. We need fewer air wings dedicated to stopping nonexistent communist aggression overseas—and more aircraft patrolling U.S. airspace to thwart assaults launched with private planes, hijacked or otherwise. We need less defense pork, ranging from obsolete bases to unnecessary weapons—and more money to counteract less obvious unconventional threats.

Most fundamentally, we need a foreign policy that emphasizes defending America, not allied states, and which accurately counts the cost of unnecessary meddling abroad, eschewing involvement where the benefits are negligible and the risks are significant.

There is no more important duty for the U.S. government than homeland defense. But the key to protecting Americans is not creating a new agency. The key is refocusing the attention of the Department of Defense on defense.

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