



Adversaries are watching our American security leadership

BY JANE HARMAN AND MICHAEL LEITER, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS — 04/12/19 12:00 PM EDT
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The sudden departure of top-level officials at the Department of Homeland Security and single focus on security at the southern border risks undermining critical functions of the agency we helped to create, and making America less safe.

Helping hurricane and wildfire victims and their communities recover, routine checks at our ports of entry to track terror suspects and possible immigration violations, saving people off our rugged and distant coasts, and now tracking the malicious ones and zeros adversaries use to exploit our computer networks are all critical jobs. The mission of the department is purposeful: to secure the nation from the “many threats we face.” It isn’t just to focus on border security challenges, or even more specifically, land borders with Mexico.

As two people who shepherded the department through its creation and early growing pains, we find it particularly troubling that such a focus is being placed on the border above all else. It was after all a “failure of imagination” as well as a series of mistakes across the United States intelligence and law enforcement communities that let the 9/11 hijackers slip through our systems. When the department was created in late 2002, lawmakers (including one of us) intended for it to prevent future attacks and security risks of all kinds, within a careful assessment of priorities.

The road has been long and very bumpy. There have been major wins and there have been major challenges over the last 17 years of the department’s history. In the win column, we have fully functioning “trusted traveler” systems for air and border travelers through the Pre Check, Global Entry and Nexus programs. These programs help the Department sort those who pose no threat and focus carefully on those who might. As an added benefit, according to former Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson, the Transportation Security Administration seizes thousands of guns in carry-on luggage. Many of which are loaded.

Plus, the department has worked methodically with American cities to protect key targets and share intelligence that cops on the beat can actually use. In one case, in which we were both involved, a troubled individual was producing ricin in his hotel room. Most people don’t know what ricin looks like and what to do if they find it. So a program ensured that easy to understand descriptions were made available to cops in the area in case they found the deadly substance, which they did.

Major American companies would tell you that the assistance provided by the department after crippling cyber attacks was invaluable. Private companies aren't set up to respond to sophisticated, highly resourced nation-state attacks, and the department has proactively sent out alerts about key techniques and trends (think by North Korea) that have made a significant impact. Plus, their efforts to address the WannaCry malware incident that shut down hospitals in the midst of surgeries without access to patient records was exactly what we should expect from the department.

Challenges have included a poor response to victims of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, though efforts have become markedly improved since then. There are also a variety of programs that have over-spent without much to show for them. Writ large, the department continues to require department-wide management and budgetary maturity as it manages a far flung and sprawling enterprise. Important reforms have begun, but they require ongoing focus and permanent, Senate-confirmed leadership to bring to fruition.

Current, ongoing hard problems include keeping confidence in the United States election system for the 2020 presidential election as well as helping to secure the nearly all-digital 2020 Census — notably digital problems that respect no border. As has been painfully illustrated over the past several years, domestic terrorism of all sorts, in particular far right wing extremist violence, is on the rise and the department must work with the FBI and local officials to address the threat. These are major undertakings that require presidential level attention.

And there are also opportunities ahead for the department to shine. The implementation of 5G networks will be game-changing for the United States and global economies. They also pose significant security concerns as more data will be transiting those systems even faster and in a larger scale than we enjoy today. In March, the department began to review the risks posed by 5G technology by analyzing the broad risks to the infrastructure, not specific actors or types of equipment. A clear-eyed look at the risks across the entire 5G system will be critical for leaders to make informed and rational decisions about the tools that will power our advanced communications over the next decades.

Security does not mean preventing the free-flow of trade and traffic across our borders — air, sea and land — it means protecting what should come in and out lawfully. Both the Bush and Obama administrations embraced this policy and there were hopes it would continue to be the policy of this administration. Our adversaries are watching.

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