

POLICY & RESEARCH FORUM

HOMELAND SECURITY PRIORITIES FOR THE 111TH CONGRESS

Presentations By:

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Moderated by:

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Former Staff Director and Chief Counsel
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As part of its Policy & Research Forum series, the Homeland Security Policy Institute hosted a discussion, "Homeland Security Priorities for the 111th Congress," on February 20, 2009. Co-moderated by HSPI Director Frank Cilluffo and HSPI Senior Fellow Michael Bopp, the panel featured the staff leadership of both the Senate and House homeland security committees: Michael L. Alexander, Majority Staff Director, Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs; Brandon Milhorn, Minority Staff Director and Chief Counsel, Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs; I. Lanier Avant, Majority Staff Director, House Committee on Homeland Security; and Michael J. Russell, Minority Chief Counsel, House Committee on Homeland Security.

Michael Bopp, HSPI Senior Fellow, and former Staff Director and Chief Counsel to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs, opened the event by emphasizing that the Department of



Homeland Security (DHS) is at a key point in its development. While working to mitigate threats to the nation, DHS is also undergoing its first presidential administration transition. “The department,” Bopp underscored, “has its work cut out.” The event provided an opportunity for congressional staff to share their homeland security priorities.

From the Senate, Michael Alexander cited top priorities including confirmation of DHS leadership nominees; the passage of a DHS authorization bill; Senate input into the possible merger of the National Security Council and Homeland Security Council; and renewal of the Chemical Facility Anti-Terrorism Act. Alexander also foresees the committee focusing on border security, rail security, and cybersecurity. Brandon Milhorn, too, underscored the importance of cybersecurity and the need for the federal government to further engage the private sector in this area. He also emphasized the need for Congress to continue to study homegrown terrorism; and the importance of streamlining DHS management processes.


The House staff concurred with and supported the priorities of the Senate staff. I. Lanier Avant also highlighted the need to pass legislation to address the matter of “over-classification” so as to ensure that state and local law enforcement officers have the information they need. Michael Russell noted the following as key priorities: passing a DHS authorization bill; maintaining a moratorium on re-organizing DHS; and consolidating homeland security oversight jurisdiction. He referenced the President’s recent Executive Orders concerning Guantanamo Bay as another “key issue.”

HSPI Director Frank Cilluffo pressed the panelists on the question of impediments to streamlining homeland security oversight jurisdiction, asking “what will it take for the committees to successfully address this issue? Presidential leadership on the matter? Leadership of the House and Senate to come together?” The panel agreed that it would take time; and more than one speaker suggested that action in this area will require Congress to first feel a sense of urgency about the issue.

Fusion centers located around the nation were judged to be a work in progress, overall. Efforts are underway to build a more robust understanding of what our capabilities and shortcomings are in terms of intelligence collection, analysis, and sharing. Milhorn noted the importance of these centers, citing the need for a two-way flow of information and intelligence, between federal authorities and the state and local levels.

The panel also noted budgetary pressures, with Bopp referencing the “dichotomy ... between grant funding [directed to the state and local level], and funding for programmatic requirements in the department” – specifically, he queried how DHS’ leadership might balance and manage the twin pressures to maintain both grant and program support.

Both the Senate and House staff highlighted the significance of the forthcoming Quadrennial Homeland Security Review (QHSR) in terms of its promise for setting priorities, allocating resources, and eliminating existing overlap. The need for other components of the federal government (outside DHS) to support these ends was also raised.



The HSPI Policy & Research Forum (PRF) series is designed to spotlight cutting-edge policy solutions and innovative strategies to some of the most pressing national and international concerns. The Forum features leading officials, practitioners and thinkers in a systematic way designed to better highlight their work and promote a dialogue on effective solutions to current issues. For more information on the series, see the PRF website: http://www.gwumc.edu/hspi/Programs_PRF.htm.