

**Testimony of  
The Honorable Tom Ridge**

**US House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security  
Implications of DHS Leadership Vacancies on the Mission and Morale**

**December 12, 2013**

Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Thompson, and Members of the Committee: I am Tom Ridge, current CEO of Ridge Global. I was privileged to serve as the first Secretary of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security from 2003-2005. I am pleased to see many friends from both sides of the aisle with whom I have worked closely over the years.

As the first Secretary, seeing DHS and its people succeed is certainly of great personal interest to me. But of utmost importance, is seeing DHS succeed on behalf of our nation and its citizens. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to share my thoughts about what I believe to be a serious threat to the effectiveness of the Department of Homeland Security. That threat is the unacceptable number of senior level vacancies that have existed in the department's leadership structure for an extended period of time.

I was asked on September 11<sup>th</sup> of this year to testify before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and to comment on challenges that remain for the Department of Homeland Security 10 years after its founding. The issue of senior level vacancies was one of the major concerns that I and others expressed that day to your colleagues in the other body. Three months later, the concerns remain.

Today our nation finds itself in a threat environment that has never been more complex. Tensions are high in the Middle East. Al-Qaeda is resurging around the world. Other terrorist groups have expanded their organizations. We are faced with both physical and ever expanding cybersecurity threats. And Congress is poised to resume the critical debate over border security as it considers immigration reform.

In this tempest, DHS has, in recent months, had no permanent Secretary and no confirmed Deputy Secretary. And we have seen extended vacancies for

General Counsel, Commissioner of Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and Under Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis, to name a few. A simple review of the leadership link to the DHS website shows a disconcerting number of senior and critical posts designated as “acting” or “vacant.”

While several key nominations were recently made, to include that of Mr. Jeh Johnson to become Secretary, some of these positions had no nominees for months. This summer, as many as 15 senior DHS leadership positions were vacant simultaneously. And, if I understand correctly, there has been no confirmed Inspector General for more than two years. The Department should never be in such a position as it begs the question, “Just who is minding the store?”

The Administration and Congress do not need a commission or super committee to solve this problem. The solutions are rather straight-forward, but do require leadership:

1. At the direction of the President, the Office of Presidential Personnel must better anticipate vacancies and make filling critical homeland security and national security positions a priority. Quality candidates must be vetted in a thorough, but timely manner. The failure to do so sends a troubling signal about the Administration’s level of commitment to the mission. I am afraid that recent history does not speak well of the current Administration and its commitment to the Department, its employees and the citizens they serve.
2. Once nominations are made by the President, the United States Senate should, likewise, act in a timely manner to consider nominees and to schedule a vote in the exercise of its constitutional advice and consent responsibilities. Senators have every right to ask tough questions in regard to nominees. But ask the tough questions, let each Senator follow her or his conscience, and vote. The confirmation process for homeland and national security positions should not be utilized for political gamesmanship.

In standing-up DHS in 2003, we were working to create a unique and unified department culture out of 22 agencies and more than 180,000 employees—a daunting challenge. This has remained a challenge in the department’s first

decade. And while Acting Secretary Beers and other acting executives have worked diligently in recent months, you simply cannot build nor can you sustain a mission-focused culture with a high number of vacancies and leaders in non-permanent status.

At the end of the day, no organization can function effectively without trusted, respected, and consistent leadership. Without it, an organization, as my friend Senator Carper has said, is “rudderless.” The employees of DHS—such as Border Patrol and ICE agents, CBP officers and TSA personnel—are on the front lines protecting our homeland every day. They are accountable. They deserve to have those at the top of their chain of command in place and providing accountable leadership.

In the early days of the department, I was fortunate to have a senior leadership team that was mission-focused. We were not perfect, but we had a sense of mission. And we had a sense of urgency. Today, that sense of urgency seems to be missing and it undermines mission and morale.

Mr. Chairman, with my remaining time, I would like to briefly address one more issue impacting DHS morale. That is the Congress has not reorganized itself for homeland security oversight. When I testified before the 9/11 Commission as Secretary in 2004, the Commissioners were concerned that our DHS leadership team reported to approximately 88 combined Senate and House homeland security oversight committees. The Commission expressed this concern in their final report, including recommendations to adjust congressional committee oversight.

Today, as we approach the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 Commission report, DHS reports to more than 100 congressional committees. The Department of Defense, with a far larger budget and more personnel, reports to less than 40 committees.

The endless barrage of Hill inquiries and preparation for testimony drains from the department’s leadership (permanent or acting) one of its most important resources: time. And it is certainly a morale issue for those whose primary mission is, not to bounce from committee hearing to committee hearing, but, to lead their agencies, bureaus and programs.

Let me be clear. Oversight is the duty of Congress. It is your responsibility and it is absolutely necessary. But the current number of congressional committees with homeland security jurisdiction is not oversight, it is overkill.

While DHS has a leading role, homeland security is a national mission. All of the players—federal, state, and local agency stakeholders and private sector partners—must regularly and honestly evaluate their own roles and responsibilities. This must apply to the Congress as well. To take a hard look at what works and what does not work is not to challenge anyone's leadership. It is to demonstrate leadership. And leadership is something sorely needed at DHS and across the maturing homeland security enterprise.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am happy to answer any questions you and your colleagues may have.

###