



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Hearing Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Trouble at the Top: Are Vacancies at the Department of Homeland Security Undermining the Mission?

May 1, 2019

Today, the Committee on Homeland Security is meeting to examine how the unprecedented number of vacancies and continual turnover at the Department of Homeland Security is undermining its critical mission to secure the homeland. Put simply, since taking office President Trump has decimated the leadership ranks of his own Department of Homeland Security.

In recent weeks alone, President Trump has: dismissed Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen; circumvented the law by forcing Acting Deputy Secretary and Under Secretary for Management, Claire Grady, to resign so he could install Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Kevin McAleenan as Acting Secretary; asked Transportation Security Administration (TSA) Administrator David Pekoske to serve as Deputy Secretary while also running TSA; and pulled the nomination of Ronald Vitiello for Immigration and Customs Enforcement Director, prompting his resignation. In addition to the Secretary and Deputy Secretary vacancies, at least 12 other critical positions across the Department's key components and offices are operating without permanent leadership. The President has failed to nominate anyone to fill most of these vacancies, even though many have been held by acting officials for the entirety of the Trump Administration. Moreover, there are another 50 senior leadership positions vacant throughout the Department, including those tasked with overseeing the daily operations of DHS.

This chaos appears to be by design, orchestrated by a President who wants to be able to remove the Department's leadership on a whim. He has said himself: "I like Acting[s] because I can move so quickly. It gives me more flexibility." In other words, the President wants people who have not gone through the confirmation process because they are more beholden to him and more likely to carry out his controversial policies without question.

Unfortunately, it is the Department, its mission, and perhaps ultimately the American people that suffer. Since being created by the merger of 22 different agencies in 2003, DHS has struggled to mature and become a single, cohesive Department. These vacancies only exacerbate the Department's fundamental challenges with acquisition management, budgeting, strategic planning, and personnel management. The Department is left without consistent leadership in place to set a vision or agenda for the agency that extends well beyond just border security.

DHS's mission is broad and diverse and covers everything from counterterrorism to cyber security to protection of dignitaries to coordinating the federal government's response to natural disasters. The Department needs a Secretary with a breadth of knowledge to provide leadership across DHS and help further unify its components and offices to protect the homeland. The reliance on acting leadership further depresses morale at the Department, which already consistently ranks at the bottom of Federal employee surveys. Today, we are fortunate to have two expert witnesses before us who can speak to the challenges DHS is facing under this Administration. The Government Accountability Office has audited the Department's management since DHS was established, giving the Comptroller General unique perspective on the current situation. The Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General is charged with providing independent oversight and promoting excellence, integrity, and accountability within DHS.

Despite having left the position in late 2017, Mr. Roth is the last confirmed DHS Inspector General as his permanent replacement has still not been confirmed. I know his testimony will inform our oversight of the leadership void at DHS.

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