



**OPENING STATEMENT**

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**MEDIA CONTACTS**

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**Statement of Chairman Michael McCaul (R-TX)  
House Homeland Security Committee**

*Defending Against Bioterrorism: How Vulnerable is America?*

Remarks as Prepared

I want to welcome Senator Lieberman and Governor Ridge back to the Committee. I commend you both for your continuing public service and your efforts to protect our Nation—particularly on the issue of biodefense.

The threat from weapons of mass destruction may have faded from public view since 9/11, but the dangers have not diminished.

Terrorists and rogue states are as committed as ever to obtaining WMD capabilities to intimidate our people and to inflict unspeakable harm. Unfortunately, our level of readiness has not kept pace with the growing risk.

Last year the Ebola crisis showed us that we are not fully prepared to confront biological threats. We learned that the federal government did not have the systems in place to address the situation and lacked clear lines of authority. We learned that many frontline healthcare workers did not have the skills or basic training needed.

And we learned that officials lacked a plan for communicating the government's response to the public, including reassuring the American people that it could keep the contagion from spreading through international air travel. Fortunately, we kept the virus from spreading, but there were important lessons to be learned.

We know that terrorists are still dead set on obtaining WMD devices to use in their attacks. We have seen groups like ISIS use makeshift chemical weapons on the battlefield and boast about plans to smuggle radiological material into the United States. And with recent FBI stings in places like Moldova, we know that there are sellers ready to supply the ingredients for these tools of terror. Bioterrorism is especially alarming. Technological advances have put dangerous biological agents within reach of extremist groups—capabilities that were previously available only to nation-states.

We also know there is no shortage of enemies who would seek to bring WMD devices into our country if they had the opportunity.

At our recent worldwide threats hearing, FBI Director James Comey indicated that the potential smuggling of a weapon of mass destruction into the Western Hemisphere is, in his opinion, a “very serious threat.”

That is why we must take the recommendations of Senator Lieberman and Governor Ridge very seriously.

Over the course of the past year, their Study Panel hosted a number of meetings to address the full spectrum of the bioterror threat, and their final report provides a thorough review of the challenges we face on that front. It makes 33 recommendations on a number of topics including leadership, strategy, intelligence gathering and dissemination, medical countermeasures, and response.

It comes as no surprise to me that one of your main findings is the lack of federal leadership and coordination at the highest level of the executive branch. With a dozen agencies playing a role in the biodefense space, we must have a senior individual coordinating these efforts. Indeed, one of the main questions I asked during the Ebola response was “Who is in charge?” Unfortunately, that would still be an open question today.

That is why I have advocated for the reinstatement of the Special Assistant to the President for Biodefense. Your report calls for the designation of the Vice President as the responsible official, along with the development of a White House Biodefense Coordination Council.

I look forward to discussing this recommendation and why you believe the Vice President would be in the best position to address this threat.

We are also particularly interested in your assessment of the responsibilities of the Department of Homeland Security in this space.

The report highlights shortcomings of the Department’s biological surveillance and detection efforts through the National Biosurveillance Integration System (NBIS) and the BioWatch Program. The Committee shares your concerns and has a long history of conducting oversight of NBIS and BioWatch.

In fact, the Emergency Preparedness Subcommittee, after holding a hearing on the bioterrorism threat earlier this year, is planning additional hearings on biosurveillance and detection later this year.

The Committee is currently considering the Department’s proposal to consolidate a number of its WMD functions into a new, CBRNE Office.

Your argument about the need for leadership and coordination for biodefense also rings true for chemical, radiological, nuclear, and explosives activities. This is a priority for Secretary Johnson, and I believe that by consolidating the various offices within the Department with responsibility for CBRNE, we will elevate the mission and fix a broken bureaucracy so that we can keep our Nation safe.

Finally, I'd be remiss if I didn't highlight your discussion of the fragmented congressional jurisdiction for homeland security oversight. Ranking Member Thompson and I, and Chairman King before me, have repeatedly called for the consolidation of congressional jurisdiction.

I will continue to work on this issue with the new Speaker to ensure Congress can address some of the oversight challenges you discuss in the report.

Hearings like this give us a better sense of what we're up against—and how we can make sure our agencies are prepared to keep WMD threats from reaching our shores and respond to them decisively if they do.

We appreciate the work of your panel, and you have my commitment that this Committee will do its part to address these challenges through further oversight and legislation.

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