



COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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

A Review of the Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Request for the Department of Homeland Security

March 3, 2020

Acting Secretary Wolf, you are here today under extraordinarily troubling circumstances. Americans are rightfully concerned about the coronavirus that has spread across the globe and claimed the lives of thousands, including at least six here at home. They are looking to their government for leadership and guidance. Unfortunately, the Trump Administration has not been equal to the task so far.

In the face of this potential pandemic, the President has downplayed its threat, overstated how close scientists are to developing a vaccine, and muzzled experts in his own administration who disagree with him. As the crisis unfolds, the President has continued to hold political rallies, including a recent one where he called the coronavirus a “hoax” perpetrated by Democrats. Even for a President who has a casual relationship with the truth, this is not only an outrageous lie but also incredibly dangerous.

The President must not shirk his responsibility. The country needs him to step up in a time of crisis, like presidents of both parties have done throughout our Nation’s history. That means acknowledging the threat; prioritizing the health and security of the American people above political considerations or the stock market; and allowing doctors, scientists and other qualified experts to offer candid assessments of the situation and direct the Federal response.

As for the Department of Homeland Security, I remain concerned about the lack of steady leadership and persistent vacancies, especially during this crucial time. Mr. Wolf is the fifth person to serve as Secretary during 3 years of Trump Administration. It has been 328 days since the Department of Homeland Security has had a Senate-confirmed Secretary.

It is not even certain that Mr. Wolf’s appointment is valid. Moreover, a Federal court ruled in recent days that the Acting Deputy Secretary’s appointment as USCIS Director was unlawful, calling into question his position at the Department.

Unfortunately, the President appears to prefer chaos to order and political expediency to good government. Make no mistake – the ongoing vacancies and lack of steady leadership have consequences, especially at a time like this.

For example, since 9/11, the Federal government has invested heavily in developing doctrine to define roles and responsibilities for incident response. But no one in the Administration seems to be familiar with them. As Americans face a potential coronavirus pandemic, the Administration appears to be caught flatfooted, scrambling to figure out who is in charge.

Meanwhile, the President’s proposed budget prioritizes his draconian immigration campaign promises at the expense of our core homeland security activities and responsibilities, including agencies and programs that are integral to the coronavirus response.

I remain committed to ensuring the Department receives the funding it needs to carry out its mission on behalf of the American people. Similarly, members of both parties rejected the President's recent low-ball coronavirus emergency supplemental request.

Apparently the President is happy to spend an unlimited amount of U.S. taxpayer money on a useless border wall, but faced with the prospect of global pandemic he would have nicked-and-dimed our response. This is unacceptable.

Now is certainly not the time to leave Federal agencies engaged in the response short of resources. In the coming days, we will send to the President a bill providing the funding necessary to fight the coronavirus.

Before I close, I want to address the challenges associated with the Department's refusal to cooperate with the Committee's oversight efforts. Under the Trump Administration, the Department has failed to provide the documents requested by this Committee as part of its constitutionally mandated oversight efforts, even under subpoena.

When the Committee does receive documents, they are incomplete or heavily redacted so as to render them useless. The behavior of the Department gives the impression that it is seeking to evade oversight and has something to hide. I hope that is not true.

If we can't trust the Trump Administration to be transparent with regular congressional oversight, how can we trust it to be honest with the American people in a time of crisis? It is past time for the President and his Administration to be the leaders the American people need and deserve. They are counting on the Administration to secure the nation and on Congress to hold you accountable.

Please know that we will uphold our responsibility, Mr. Acting Secretary, and I sincerely hope the President and his Administration uphold theirs.

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