

**Testimony of Thomas S. Warrick  
Senior Fellow and Director of the Future of DHS Project  
Atlantic Council**

**“Securing the Homeland:  
Reforming DHS to Meet Today’s Threats”**

**House Committee on Homeland Security  
July 15, 2021, 12:00 noon**

When the Atlantic Council started developing the [Future of DHS Project](#) in June 2019, no Washington-based think tank had done a comprehensive study of the Department of Homeland Security since 2004. Today, you have three: by the Atlantic Council’s [Future of DHS Project](#), the Center for a New American Security, led by Carrie Cordero, and the Center for American Progress, led by Katrinia Mulligan. True, there has been a lot of expert thought and advice across the political spectrum on the individual issues DHS is involved in, including from experts like Frank Cilluffo—on issues like cybersecurity, borders and immigration, counterterrorism, and climate change—but in the fifteen years since 2004, there had not been as much attention given to DHS as an institution.

Yet it’s clear that DHS needs all the good help it can get. DHS is the third-largest cabinet department in the US government. It has more than 200,000 employees. Its missions include many of our country’s most important security challenges. Many of DHS’s mission areas need more attention than they have been receiving. Since 2010, despite some years of improvement, employee morale at DHS was consistently last among large cabinet departments. Management challenges abounded, with 2020 being a particularly tumultuous year.

Although our three reports differ in important ways, they have a number of fundamental points in common. As I walk you through the conclusions of the Atlantic Council’s Future of DHS Project reports, I want to recognize some of the progress to date, with special thanks to the work of this Committee and Chairman Thompson for leading the push for reform at DHS. I will also note some of the points that the three respective reports have in common. I want to offer my endorsement H.R. 4357, the [DHS Reform Act of 2021](#), which embodies some of the best thinking about how DHS needs to be reformed. I also want to urge the members of this Committee to continue the effort and make the DHS Reform Act the first of a series of congressional efforts to make the Department more effective in protecting the American people from non-military threats.

I should take a moment to note the Atlantic Council’s policy of intellectual independence. The Atlantic Council itself does not take positions on legislation. Views expressed are those of individual experts. I also want to credit our [Senior Advisory](#)

[Board](#) of former secretaries and acting secretaries, who helped guide the project and the [more than a hundred experts](#) who contributed to our findings and recommendations. Of course, responsibility for the conclusions is mine, as the lead author and director of the Future of DHS Project.

## **Summary of the Atlantic Council's Future of DHS Reports from 2020**

### **I. Re-Focus DHS's Mission on Protecting the Nation from Non-Military Threats**

Any comprehensive assessment of DHS must start with the need to re-focus DHS's mission. On this foundational point, all three reports agree. The Future of DHS Project report, released in August and September 2020, said that the most urgent threat facing the United States was the [COVID-19 pandemic](#). The greatest long-term threat that DHS needs to focus on is [the threat to lives and infrastructure from climate change](#). The Biden administration has taken up both these challenges with the priority they deserve.

On the threat of terrorism, we pointed out that while terrorism may have been the reason DHS was founded, over the years DHS has had missions added to it that leave terrorism one mission among many. I agree with my colleague Carrie Cordero's conclusion that DHS needs a new authorizing statute to replace the Homeland Security Act of 2002 in a way that makes DHS's missions more clear.

Even the terrorism threat is changing. DHS needs to use the next two to three years to get ready to deal with a different terrorist threat than we faced on 9/11. Our report said in September 2020 that DHS needs to give [more attention and resources to domestic terrorism](#), white supremacism, and other "homegrown" causes. The January 6 attack on the US Capitol only reinforced this conclusion. The Atlantic Council's "[After the Insurrection](#)" series has looked at what needs to be done to address this threat. The Biden administration's domestic terrorism strategy released in May was a good start, especially its call for the domestic terrorism response to be ideologically neutral while recognizing that white supremacists and other like-minded violent extremists are unquestionably responsible for more lethal attacks than any other ideological movement in the past decade—and as an attack on American democracy, nothing comes close to the January 6 attack on the Capitol. It was also good to see additional funding for domestic terrorism programs at DHS and the Department of Justice (DOJ). However, the strategy [needs more money and people to succeed](#). A good strategy alone doesn't tell us victory's sticker price.

There is one very important point about re-focusing DHS missions that I want to make. The Future of DHS report calls for DHS to take on the overall mission of defending the United States and the American people from non-military threats. DHS missions currently include protecting American democracy from cyberattacks, protecting critical

infrastructure, election security, countering foreign nation-state misuse of social media. I group all of these under the umbrella of "[protecting American democracy](#)."

DHS needs to maintain its level of resources and efforts on counterterrorism, aviation security, border management and immigration, maritime security, emergency management, disaster response, and protecting US continuity of governance. None of DHS's current missions is going away, but this shows that DHS currently has most of the stovepipes of non-military defense already under its umbrella.

The United States is fortunate to have the Department of Defense (DoD) and our men and women in uniform leading the defense of the nation against military threats. However, DoD is not the right place to lead the defense of the nation against non-kinetic threats. However, there does need to be a cabinet department that can provide unity of effort against non-military threats.

If DoD's bumper-sticker version of its mission is "We fight and win America's wars," [DHS needs to think of its mission](#) as "**We lead the defense of the Nation against non-military threats.**"

This is what DHS needs to move towards.

DHS also needs to think of [communications as a core mission](#). This means better communications with other parts of the federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, the private sector, and especially the American people. DHS needs to have access to classified communications and a press office equal to that of other departments for which communications with the public is a vital part of its mission. DHS needs to be staffed resourced for all these things. Currently, it's not.

**DHS also [needs the trust of the American people to succeed](#).** DHS needs to factor into its decisions how its actions affect the trust the American people have in DHS. We need as a country to recognize that DHS, like our uniformed military and intelligence community, needs to be non-partisan. This point is one on which my colleagues and I strongly agree.

## **II. Modernize DHS's Approach to Public-Private Partnerships**

The Future of DHS report also urged DHS to [modernize its approach to public-private partnerships](#). DHS's role is unique among federal cabinet departments in how it works with other federal agencies, with state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, with the private sector, and with the American people. Other federal departments do some of these things—DHS does all of them.

As one example, for telecommunications and financial companies to defend their networks against today's cyber threats will require a closer partnership with DHS than

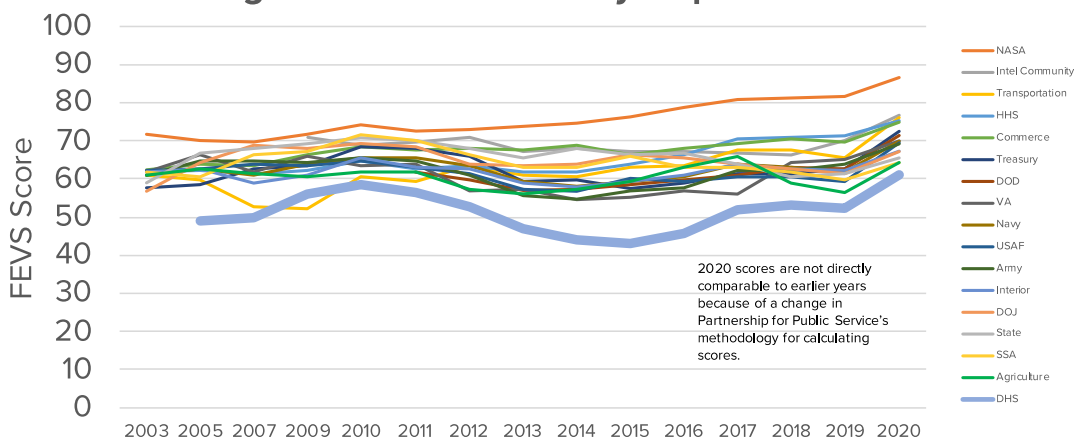
ever before. Network operators need higher-fidelity, often classified intelligence to take action, and increasing the speed of sharing is now vital, because cyberattacks take place at network speeds, and the federal government needs to be able to communicate relevant information, including attribution, in real time. Adversaries from overseas—whether nation-states or cyber criminals—will exploit any delays in defending computer and financial networks. This will require a closer and more sophisticated partnership in defense of our computer and financial networks.

The partnership that DHS has with state and local governments is also going to be vital in [defending American lives and infrastructure from climate change and extreme weather](#). Other cabinet departments are involved in tackling ways to halt the rise in global temperature. However, a vital part of our national defense against these changes has to be action by DHS through FEMA and the CISA infrastructure protection experts working with state and local governments and the private sector to find ways to protect lives and infrastructure from climate change and extreme weather. Our report offered a number of [specific recommendations](#) how to do this. DHS needs to be one of the departments at the center of our nation’s efforts to address climate change.

### III. DHS’s Morale Can Be Significantly Improved

DHS also has more than its share of management challenges. **Foremost among these is [low morale](#)**. DHS has been last among large cabinet departments since 2010, according to the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS) as analyzed by the Partnership for Public Service’s Best Places to Work in the Federal Government (hereafter, “Partnership”). I will now present several updates the results we released last year that incorporates new data released from the 2020 FEVS survey taken from September 14 to November 5, 2020. (As the Partnership [made clear](#), for 2020, they changed the way they calculated scores, so much of what appears to be an across-the-board improvement in morale across the federal government is actually due to this change in the methodology.)

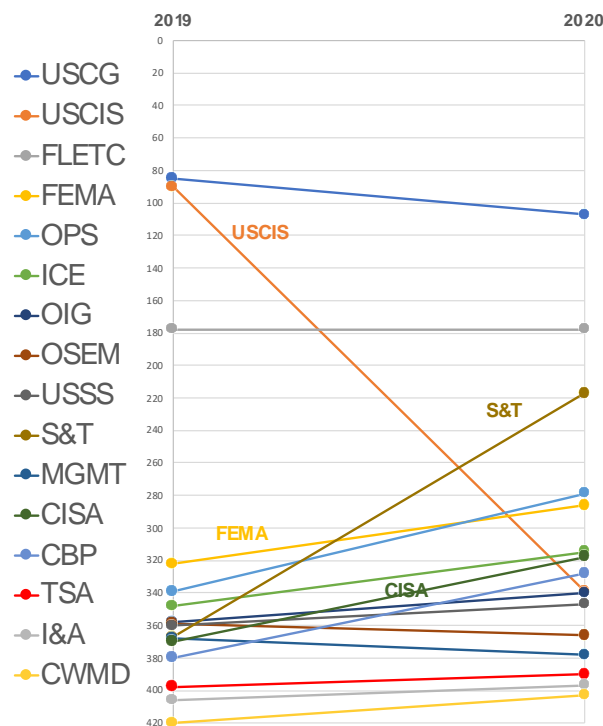
Figure 1: FEVS Scores by Department



As Figure 1 above shows, DHS still ranks last in overall morale of large departments and agencies in the federal government. Our report released last September showed that improving morale at DHS is not a hopeless task—[far from it](#). DHS has had numerous [success stories](#) improving morale at the component levels. We cited the data showing what Frank Taylor did at the [Office of Intelligence & Analysis](#) between 2014 and 2017, where his reorganization led to higher morale. Similarly, what Sarah Saldaña did at [Immigrations and Customs Enforcement](#) (ICE) between 2015 and 2017, and what Randolph “Tex” Alles and John Kelly did at the [US Secret Service](#) between 2017 and 2019, all show that morale at DHS can be improved significantly, and over a span of two to three years.

Unfortunately, in 2020, morale at one of DHS’s two long-time success stories—US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)—fell off a cliff. Morale at the [US Coast Guard and USCIS](#) have long been among DHS’s success stories. But between May 2019 and September-October 2020, USCIS fell from 90<sup>th</sup> out of 420 sub-agencies across the federal government to 339<sup>th</sup> out of 411. The reasons for this deserve a hearing of their own.

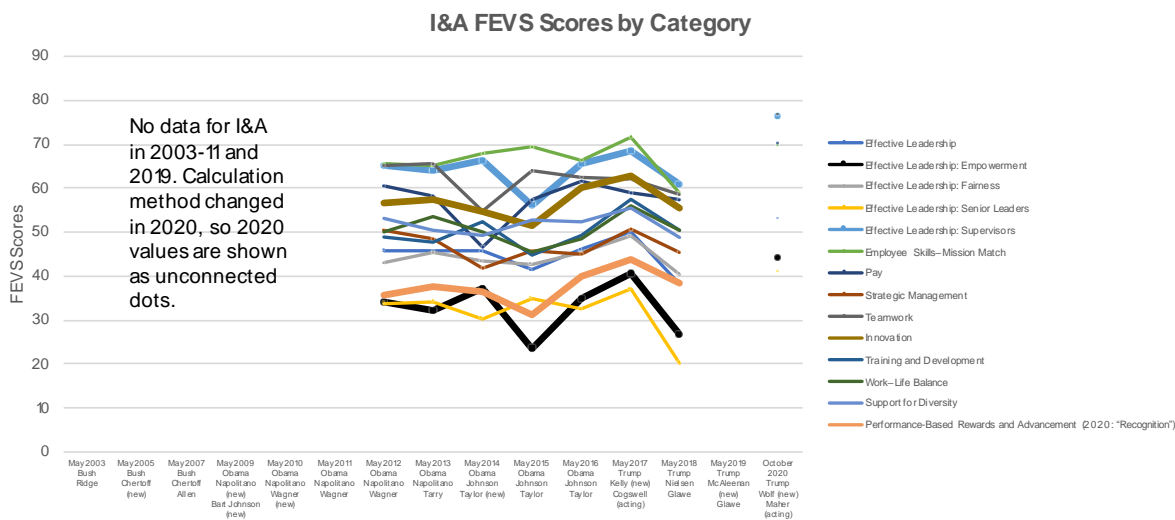
**Figure 2**  
Ranks of Subagencies  
May 2019 vs. Sept.-Oct. 2020 Survey



Interestingly, DHS still had success stories in 2020. Three of the DHS components most involved in helping with the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 election—the Science & Technology Directorate (S&T), the Federal Emergency

Management Agency (FEMA), and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA)—all saw their morale improve because, I believe, of a combination of leadership and commitment to the importance of the mission.

**Figure 3**



Another morale success story in late 2020 appears to have been the Office of Intelligence & Analysis (I&A), which saw a sharp drop in morale in May 2018, and opted out of the FEVS survey for 2019. I&A underwent a change in leadership on August 3, 2020, and two months later, survey data suggested that morale had increased back to the levels that Frank Taylor left it in 2017. Some of this may be due to the [change in Partnership’s calculation methodology](#), but the improvement over 2018 appears to be real.

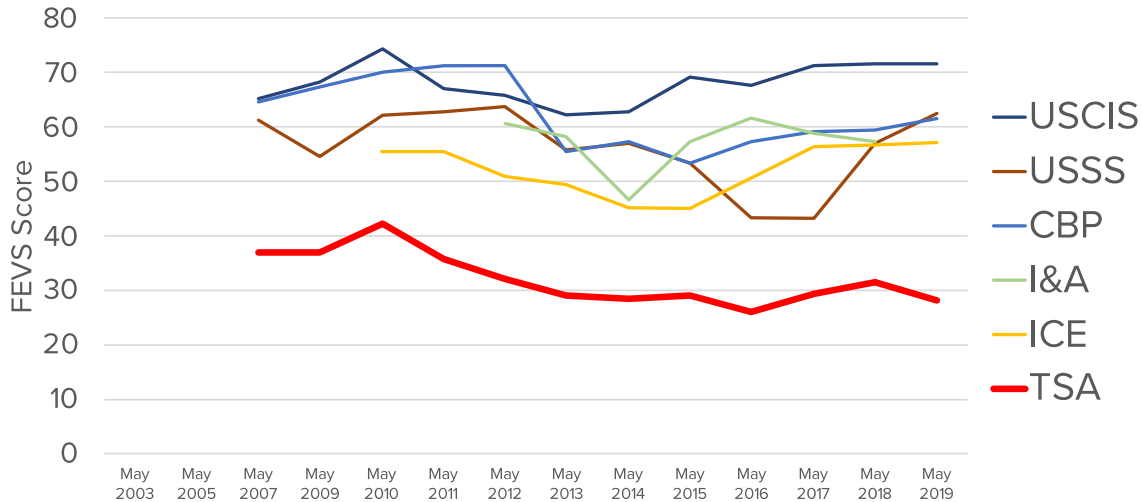
Morale, of course, does not tell the whole story. The FEVS survey concluded on November 5, just before the results of the 2020 presidential election were known. And we at the Atlantic Council have been [closely following](#) the intelligence failures that led to the January 6 attack on the US Capitol. My colleague Mitch Silber has [documented the intelligence failures](#) that allowed the January 6 attack to surprise the Capitol Police leadership and much of the country. I am sure that the new acting under secretary, John Cohen, will tackle both the substantive mission and morale of I&A together, because the two are related.

However, overall morale in DHS continues to be dominated by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP), which make up about [60 percent of the DHS workforce](#). Both TSA and CBP have underlying factors that negatively affect morale, and both need to be addressed.

Our report recommended making [significant improvements at TSA](#), especially to address the low pay of TSA’s screening officers. In our report and before a

subcommittee of this committee, I showed this slide, which makes it clear that low pay at TSA urgently needs to be addressed:

**Figure 7: FEVS scores by Component: Pay**



This committee held a [hearing](#) on May 4 on H.R. 903, the [Rights for the TSA Workforce Act](#). On June 3, Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas [announced](#) that TSA would expand collective bargaining, adopt better workplace standards and practices, and increase pay for TSA’s screening workforce. Secretary Mayorkas, TSA Administrator David Pekoske, and everyone involved in this important decision deserve the recognition for making this important change. Knowing Secretary Mayorkas and Administrator Pekoske, I am confident we are seeing the first steps to turning around employee morale at TSA and DHS. It will be important to work to ensure that DHS gets the necessary funding and support to fully implement the plans that Secretary Mayorkas has directed TSA to prepare.

#### **IV. Address DHS’s Management Challenges**

Let me turn briefly to the [other management recommendations](#) in our report. While discussions of DHS’s missions tend to get the most attention, DHS needs to make significant changes to how it manages itself if it wants to succeed at those missions. These changes need more attention from the Congress and the American people.

First, [DHS headquarters needs to be strengthened](#). This is a point on which all the studies of DHS agree. Right now, component personnel think headquarters does not understand component operational practicalities. Headquarters personnel think components do not see the big picture or appreciate that external factors sometimes require changes in what components do, and sometimes how they do them. In fact, there is truth in both viewpoints.

DHS needs to [better coordinate policy and resources](#). The incoming Under Secretary for Strategy, Policy, and Plans Rob Silvers understands this. There also need to be major changes in how DHS budgets for tomorrow's threats.

DHS headquarters needs the right kind of oversight over the law enforcement missions of the Department. The Atlantic Council developed the recommendation of an [Associate Secretary](#), based on the Associate Attorney General who oversees significant parts of the Department of Justice. I am very pleased to see this recommendation included in the *DHS Reform Act of 2021*. Headquarters should not be in the business of micromanaging DHS's law enforcement components. But neither should headquarters be in the dark. One of the FBI's great strengths is the ability to shift priorities—as they did after 9/11, or after Russian, Chinese, and Iranian operatives started to interfere with American democracy in the 2016 election. There are times when the nation needs DHS's law enforcement agencies to be able to change direction to address new challenges. An Associate Secretary should be able to lead these efforts.

In addition, DHS needs to more [substantively integrate civil rights, civil liberties, and privacy protections](#) into all that it does, but especially into its law enforcement missions. This is a point on which all three of the major studies of DHS agree. The idea that DHS would deploy to Portland, Oregon, elite forces designed to operate in rugged terrain against heavily armed drug dealers and terrorists—*against the wishes of the governor and mayor involved*—violates the principles of trust that are essential for DHS to succeed. The provisions of the DHS Reform Act of 2021 should help here.

DHS also needs to learn from the experience of the Department of Defense, embodied in the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act, and allow more [rotational details of personnel between headquarters and components](#). I'm pleased to see the *DHS Reform Act of 2021* include a number of provisions that will allow these kinds of personnel details to take place.

These provisions don't get the headlines, but they are invaluable to building a Department of Homeland Security that deserves the trust of the American people, and is able to defend the Nation from non-military threats.

## **V. Strengthen and Consolidate Congressional Oversight of DHS**

Finally, I want to note the importance of [strengthening the congressional oversight of DHS](#). Ideally, DHS should have a single major authorizing committee, just as the Department of Defense does. Consolidating congressional oversight over DHS is the last remaining, unfulfilled recommendation of the 9/11 Commission. Your efforts, Mr. Chairman, and the efforts of others on this committee, have achieved much progress for this idea in the past year. These efforts need to continue, and I look forward to working with you and the other members of the Committee to strengthen the



Department of Homeland Security and make it better able to [protect the nation from non-military threats](#).

I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.