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Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)
Bang for the Border Security Buck: What do we get for \$33 billion?
Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security
April 4, 2017

This afternoon's discussion is timely given President Trump's visit to San Diego earlier this week to view the border wall prototypes.

In January, the Department of Homeland Security shared with Congress its \$33 billion border security improvement plan, of which \$18 billion would be used to fulfill President Trump's campaign promise of building a "wall" along the southern border.

As I have stated before, spending billions on a boondoggle border wall to satisfy a slogan used throughout the 2016 Presidential campaign season is a terrible use of American taxpayer money and bad border policy.

However, through a series of tweets, televised meetings with his cabinet and Members of Congress, and even a YouTube video, the President and members of the Administration, including the Secretary of Homeland Security, have repeatedly made their case over the past several weeks for this one solution.

When the President widely shares via Twitter findings from the Center for Immigration Studies, an organization that is openly anti-immigrant, I am not confident that his preference for a border wall is based on data or strategic interest.

All of us here today know full well that cartels go around, over, under, or through these walls, or smuggle narcotics in cargo shipments moving through our ports of entry.

Further, at a time when the Department's own data show that illegal entries into the United States through the Southwest land border are at the lowest levels they have been in the past 40 years, it makes little sense to rely so heavily on this plan to build walls for the next ten years.

Border security challenges are more nuanced than simply building a wall, but more than half of the funding needed to carry out the DHS Border Security Improvement Plan would be dedicated to just that.

As Ranking Member Vela stated, the Government Accountability Office has concluded

that U.S. Customs and Border Protection has absolutely no metrics to show how a wall or even land-based technology contribute to border security in general.

Without knowing the return on these investments, how can we know which tools are the most effective and cost-efficient? How does this plan we are discussing today ensure we are making the best, risk-based decisions?

Given the price tag of this plan, I find it concerning that there is no substantive analysis of life cycle costs nor a discussion of resources and acquisitions management.

If DHS and CBP are not taking into account the lessons learned from previous mistakes, such as the more than \$1 billion SBInet endeavor, DHS, with the help of the Republican led Congress, is bound to repeat them.

The Administration's singular focus on building border walls is crowding out discussions on other, well-known issues that affect our border security.

For example, both the Border Patrol and the Office of Field Operations are losing trained, experienced agents and officers at a faster rate than CBP is able to replace them.

I share Ranking Member Vela's frustration that the Trump Administration continues to overlook critical staffing problems within CBP, in particular the shortages at our ports of entry. Requiring CBP officers to work back-to-back shifts and take temporary duty assignments to compensate for the lack of officers is a precarious model to operate on.

I thank Congressman Vela for introducing H.R. 4940, the Border and Port Security Act, last month to begin fixing this problem, and I am glad to be a cosponsor.

Lastly, I am concerned by some of the policy proposals DHS is considering – and in some cases already using – to deter illegal migration.

Last month, all 12 Democrats on this Committee and 63 other Democratic colleagues sent a letter to Secretary Nielsen asking her to halt the practice of separating migrant parents from their children when they are apprehended at the border or in immigration detention in cases that do not warrant it.

The practice is inhumane, excessively punitive, and can deliberately interfere with their legal right to request asylum.

I reiterate my opposition to this practice, and I caution the Department from pursuing other such policies that do not honor our values as a Nation of immigrants.

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Media contact: Adam Comis at (202) 225-9978

