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Statement of Ranking Member Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)

Boots at the Border: Examining the National Guard Deployment to the Southwest Border

Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security

July 24, 2018

I believe this most recent deployment of the National Guard to our southern border has left many of us with more questions than answers. This is no surprise given that the rationales for many actions the Trump Administration has taken in the name of border security over the past eighteen months do not align with facts. Ever since this deployment was announced, Members of Congress have been trying to find out what exactly prompted it and other critical details about its mission.

For instance, did DHS conduct some type of assessment that identified a new National Guard deployment as a necessity? Is there a strategy and plan in place for this deployment? How long will the deployment last? How much will it cost? These are basic questions that my colleagues and I are still waiting to have answered.

In April of this year, Ranking Member Vela and I along with other ranking members wrote to Secretaries Nielsen and Mattis asking for information about the latest deployment of the National Guard to the southwest border. In response to a question about whether DHS had previously determined National Guard support was a necessity, DHS pointed to President Trump's memorandum as the reason for the deployment.

This answer leads me to believe that DHS and the DOD were caught off guard and either did not plan in advance or had to rush ongoing planning to meet the White House's directive.

The apparent lack of an assessment is especially startling in light of DHS' own data. Before Operation Jump Start in 2006, Border Patrol reported well over a million apprehensions a year. Last year, in 2017, the Border Patrol apprehended less than 310,000 people – one-third of what the apprehension rate was more than a decade ago.

DHS' own data shows that overall apprehension levels along the U.S-Mexico border are at the lowest levels we have seen in more than 40 years.

As Ranking Member Vela previously stated, the border is not lawless, as the President has argued repeatedly. Law enforcement personnel at all levels of government are active in the region and at levels that are higher now than in previous years.

In addition to the lack of an assessment, the Administration has not provided answers about the estimated cost of the current operation, where the money will come from, and whether funding will have to be taken from other priorities to pay for these operations.

Six years ago, this very subcommittee held another hearing on previous National Guard deployments to the border. Major General John Nichols, here today, testified at that hearing, along with the Government Accountability Office, that the two previous National Guard deployments to the border cost roughly \$1.35 billion, a substantial amount of money.

The funds for the current deployment will have to come from somewhere within the Department of Defense and will presumably affect other national security interests.

Compounding the absence of cost information is the lack of a time frame or end date for the deployment. The President and both Secretaries stated in early April that this deployment will continue until the “border is secure.” But, what metric is this Administration going to use to measure this vague goal?

This goal is an open question this committee has wrestled with for years, and I would like to know how the Trump Administration intends to define a “secure border.” Are states, such as Texas and Arizona, expected to keep their Guardsmen permanently deployed on border security support missions? If so, that will likely have very serious budget and readiness implications for our military and National Guard as a whole.

Smart, effective border security strategies have always been and will continue to be a bipartisan goal. However, given the politically-motivated and reactionary way this Administration has approached border security, I have serious doubts that a well-thought out strategy, or at least consideration of second and third-order consequences of rushed decisions, are driving any of it.

A hasty and poorly designed deployment will have unintentional repercussions and negative effects not only on our border communities, but on our national security as well.

Though I remain opposed to this current deployment, I thank the witnesses for agreeing to testify before us today. I know you are primarily tasked with the operational aspects of this deployment, but I hope you are able to provide a clearer picture of the strategy guiding your actions on the southern border.

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