

Opening Statement of Chairman Ron Johnson
“18 Years Later: The State of Homeland Security After 9/11”
Monday, September 9, 2019
National September 11 Memorial & Museum, New York, NY

As prepared for delivery:

This hearing of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs will come to order.

I would like to start with a brief moment of silence to honor the memory of all those who lost their lives on that terrible day, and the first responders who continue to lose their lives to diseases they contracted in untold acts of heroism.

Let me first thank Alice Greenwald and the National September 11 Memorial & Museum for hosting this field hearing, and for providing a sobering and educational tour for committee members and staff last night.

I would also like to thank everyone for attending what I hope will be a thoughtful and informative event. In particular, I would like to thank three of the former secretaries of the Department of Homeland Security, Secretaries Chertoff, Napolitano and Johnson, for their attendance, testimony, and especially their service to our country. We truly appreciate it.

The title of this hearing, “18 Years Later: The State of Homeland Security After 9/11,” describes our goal: to look back and assess what has transpired since that awful day. What actions were taken? What has, and has not been, effective? And maybe most important, what has changed?

In 2011, The Tenth Anniversary Report Card produced by the Bipartisan Policy Center focused on the extent to which the 9/11 Commission’s 41 recommendations had been implemented. The report concluded with a reminder that “we have done much, but there is much more to do.”

Much work remains because we are living in a world of rapid and dramatic change. It is essential to acknowledge that the world evolves, enemies adapt, new threats and problems emerge.

For example, if ISIS existed in 2011, it certainly was not on most people’s radar screen. We were worried about large scale planned attacks by al-Qaeda, not a terror group using video and social media to inspire lone wolf terrorists. I doubt the creators of the internet and social media platforms ever contemplated how their innovations could be used for such evil.

In his book “Slouching Towards Gomorrah,” Robert Bork illustrated how the internet provided an opportunity for previously isolated deviants to connect with others. Social media has sped up the process that Daniel Patrick Moynihan accurately described as “defining deviancy down.” As a result, we have experienced the depressing proliferation of home-grown violent extremists, mass shootings, and domestic terror attacks.

Another dramatic shift that has occurred involves the composition of illegal immigration. In 2011, only 3,938 unaccompanied children from Central America were apprehended entering our southwest border illegally, and the phenomenon of families exploiting our laws was so minor we weren't even keeping track of them. Eleven months into this fiscal year, more than 69,000 unaccompanied children and 432,000 family members have been apprehended, with most claiming asylum and being allowed to stay.

I use these examples to highlight the evolving complexity of the problems we face, and our inability to effectively address them. Unfortunately, there are not many solutions as easy and effective as hardening the cockpit doors. As chairman of this committee, I have attempted to guide us through the problem-solving process: gather information, properly define problems, identify root causes, establish achievable goals, and then — only after completing that work — begin to design workable solutions. Too often in the political realm, solutions are directed toward unachievable goals and they simply do not reflect reality.

The Tenth Anniversary Report Card detailed significant implementation of the 9/11 Commission's 41 recommendations. But those were solutions designed in response to 9/11.

In 2015, this committee's then-ranking member, Senator Tom Coburn, issued a report reviewing the Department of Homeland Security. He detailed \$544 million spent by DHS from 2003 to 2014, and criticized the department for "not successfully executing any of its five main missions."

That's a pretty harsh assessment, and after 18 years, it is necessary to ask some hard questions based on experience. For example: Is DHS too big? Does it have too many missions? Can we expect one department to be responsible for natural disasters, preventing domestic terror attacks, cybersecurity, protecting critical infrastructure, enforcing immigration law, securing our borders, investigating counterfeit U.S. currency, and protecting governmental officials. Not only does the list go on, but in addition to its operational responsibilities, DHS also reports to 92 congressional committees and subcommittees of jurisdiction, plus another 27 caucuses, commissions, and groups.

The complex set of problems our nation faces will not be solved with heated rhetoric in the midst of political squabbling. It will require individuals working together in good faith as members of this committee have done so often in the past. That's why I am grateful that a bipartisan group of senators has the opportunity to be here today to learn from a bipartisan group of former secretaries. I hope that through this work we can fairly evaluate past successes and failures and use these assessments to guide future actions and policies designed to secure our homeland.

Again, I thank the secretaries and look forward to your testimony.