

Congressional Quarterly Players: Matt Mayer Girds for the Main Battle on Capitol Hill When the War Game Ends

April 5, 2006

Sean Madigan, CQ Staff

This is a very big week for Matt Mayer.

Hospitals in Connecticut are filling up with fake victims from a mustard gas attack, and mock terrorists are ripping through New Jersey in an SUV spreading pneumonic plague.

It is day 3 of TOPOFF 3, the biggest terrorism drill conducted so far, which includes three states, a \$16 million budget and 10,000 participants.

Mayer is in the action as the Department of Homeland Security's acting executive director of State and Local Government Coordination and Preparedness. On the eve of the games last week, his office also introduced the interim National Preparedness Goal, a sophisticated plan for measuring preparedness at all levels of government.

The White House wants the plan to transform the way all future federal homeland security grants are distributed to state and local governments, shifting funding from population-based formulas to a more risk-based approach. Key to setting the stage for the change in the grant structure is the president's fiscal 2006 budget, which calls for consolidating a number of grants and shifting money to higher-risk urban areas. It is the job of Mayer, among others, to convince Congress that this is the right thing to do.

To say that will not be easy is an understatement. Slicing the pie differently means there will winners and losers, and members who stand to lose money under the administration's plan - most notably Susan Collins, R-Maine, who chairs the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee - are gearing up for a huge fight.

So is Mayer.

"He really is at the center of it all," said David Heyman, director of the homeland security program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Rocky Mountain High

Mayer, 33, came to Washington a year ago with his pregnant wife and 2-year-old daughter to become chief of staff and senior policy adviser to C. Suzanne Mencer, head of the Office for Domestic Preparedness. Mayer followed Mencer from Colorado, where she had been the state's director of public safety and he was deputy

director of the state's regulatory agencies.

Mencer, who left DHS at the beginning of this year, said she knew Mayer only by reputation when he approached her about coming along to Washington. They had not worked together in Colorado.

"He's very politically astute . . . dynamic, very aggressive," Mencer said by telephone from Denver. "When I needed a chief of staff, he was the first one I called."

Moving to Washington was a considerable gamble for Mayer and his family. His career had really taken off during the five years he had spent in Denver after graduating in 1997 from law school at Ohio State University, where - presciently, it turns out - he was editor of the Journal on Dispute Resolution.

Mayer's boss, the director of the state business regulatory agency, had just left, leaving the door open for Mayer to become director of an agency that licensed more than half a million businesses. He also had carved out a respected role in state politics, nearly pulling off an upset win as campaign manager for Republican Rick O'Donnell, who lost a 2002 race for Colorado's 7th congressional district. The same year, Mayer joined Wayne Allard's successful campaign for the U.S. Senate as director for special projects.

"A lot of people thought I was crazy," Mayer said of his decision to move to Washington during an interview at his Chinatown office, which still has his former boss's nameplate next to the door. Inside, however, Mayer has hung some of his photography, including a shot along the base path from the ball diamond in the Iowa cornfield where the movie "Field of Dreams" was filmed.

"I'm a political appointee with a six-month-pregnant wife and a 2-year-old [and accepting a] political appointment 10 months before an election . . . I wanted to serve the president and this country."

Since February, Mayer has been wearing three hats - acting executive director of the state and local preparedness office, chief of staff and senior policy adviser - to himself.

"When he turns to his staff, he turns to himself on three different occasions," Heyman jokes. As to when the president will appoint a permanent replacement to fill Mencer's job, Mayer says he has not heard anything yet. Citing a number of job openings at the top at DHS, observers say Mayer will likely continue to serve in an acting capacity for some time.

Mayer said he has not put his own name forward for the job, but will happily serve the president and DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff any way he can.

"As long as I feel that I can contribute effectively to the secretary and his vision and the president and his vision," Mayer said, "I'm happy to be the one to turn the lights

off."

Whatever Works

Mayer is ambitious, confident, cerebral, plain-spoken - and very serious. The 220 people who work for him, he thinks, would likely describe him as "hard charging, always moving, high expectations and probably a little squirrely."

"He's very results-oriented," said Dick Wadhams, chief of staff to Sen. George Allen, R-Va., who hired Mayer to work on the Allard campaign. "He has an understanding of how to make things happen." When asked about what Mayer might find difficult about his job at DHS, Wadhams said people like Mayer "might get frustrated with things not happening as fast as you want them to."

Mayer leads by example. He works long hours, but said he cares more about the end product than how the work gets done. He could not care less whether he talks to his staff in person during the day.

"I'm not a proponent of face time; I think it's a silly concept," he said. "If you can get the job done on a BlackBerry or sitting at home while your kids are in bed. I don't care about lights being on, I care about getting the job done."

Getting by on two apples a day - one in the morning and one in the afternoon - Mayer usually starts his day at about 5 a.m. and ends it past midnight. He makes dinner his first meal. "The hours are long, but the intensity of the hours is so much more severe than practicing law was," Mayer said. "It's one thing to the next throughout the day. There's just a constant flow of activity that needs to occur."

When he is not at work, he is reading. Right now, he has a two-foot stack of magazines and journals at home he said he needs to catch up on. The pile includes magazines "as fluffy as Time and Newsweek," he says, to the wonky Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy and Regulation: The Cato Review of Business and Government. He also reads four newspapers a day, including the Financial Times, because he thinks it is important to get the European perspective.

Though work could become all-consuming, Mayer said the biggest challenge to the job is balancing it with his family. He loves reading the works of J.R.R. Tolkien to his 3-year-old daughter.

But these days there is little time for anything else. Mayer said he has not played golf, gone on vacation or gone to the movies since moving to Washington a year ago.

"I love my job," Mayer said. "It has been an enormous honor. It's an opportunity of a lifetime and a dream come true in a lot of ways. And I realize that sounds [like a cliché] but the fact of the matter is that ever since I was young, I always dreamed of being a public servant."

At DHS? Mayer pauses for a few seconds.

"I have two young kids," he says evenly, "and I can think of nothing more important for me to do with my time than to help make this country more secure for them and the rest of the folks in the United States."

The Back Story

The fourth of six children in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio, Mayer said he wore a lot of hand-me-downs and had little personal space growing up. His parents instilled a strong Midwestern work ethic in him at a young age. Mayer landed his first job when he was 12, delivering newspapers. He worked his way up the after-school job ladder through pizza places, grocery stores and a Dairy Queen.

Mayer graduated from the University of Dayton in 1993 with degrees in psychology and philosophy, and from the Ohio State University College of Law in 1997.

After graduation, he took a three-week drive around the West. Less than a year later he moved to Denver to work for a private law firm. His wife - to whom he has been married almost five years - is also a lawyer. The couple have two daughters and live in Arlington, Va.

Source: CQ Homeland Security