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How Donald Trump Can Keep Us Safe

By Matt A. Mayer

President-elect Donald J. Trump and his team have an opportunity to fundamentally reform America's domestic national security apparatus. With majorities in the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, he can deliver on his promise to thoroughly reshape how the federal government secures the homeland. As the Islamic State group's control in the Middle East continues to degrade, we need to evolve our security approach to meet the next wave of returning and frustrated terrorists.

Early indications from the Trump transition team is that he will move aggressively on immigration reform. I've laid out a comprehensive plan that provides a roadmap on how to secure the border, strengthen interior enforcement activities and institute much-needed visa reforms. These reforms will ensure that our border operations focus on stopping terrorists, the trafficking cartels and other transnational organizations from exploiting weaknesses on our border to harm Americans. With smarter visa policy and aggressive interior enforcement, we can keep and get the bad guys out and preserve U.S. jobs for Americans and those here legally.

After nearly 13 years, the success of our domestic national security apparatus depends in part on getting better results from the entities within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Though this action smacks of an "inside baseball" move, the Trump administration should work closely with Speaker Paul Ryan and Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to substantially reduce the number of DHS oversight committees and subcommittees. My last count put the number at over 80 different congressional entities! When it comes to congressional oversight, success won't come by having many fathers; many fathers only ensure accountability for failures remains an orphan.

Similarly, streamlining operations shouldn't just happen on Capitol Hill. In its short life, DHS has ballooned from 180,000 employees to over 240,000 employees, with countless more working in a shadow government as contractors. President-elect Trump should form a task force whose job it is to specifically review every element and program at DHS, as well as map connections between DHS entities and other federal offices or agencies for merger opportunities, to determine how to make the federal colossus actually work. Because of the operational tempo inherent in running DHS and the factions that have built up within it, this action should not be done by the new DHS team, but by outsiders with no stake in the final recommendations.

A fourth reform involves bringing a little common sense to how the Transportation Security Administration screens airport passengers. Simply because terrorists still want to blow-up airplanes doesn't necessitate the domestic screening program in place today. The vast majority of passengers pose no threat, yet we force 100 percent of them through security lines that fail to detect component bomb parts anyway. A new national strategy should revamp how we screen passengers by removing as many Americans from the screening lines as possible. That means people like dear ol' granny Emma and lil' Billy should be able to breeze through TSA security as easily as they walk through the airport's doors.

Finally, a critical set of reforms to keep us safe involves enhancing the power and influence of local law enforcement and our 50 states over the fed-centric model we've been using. As detailed over the last year, in addition to giving states and localities a seat at the national policy table, it is time to consolidate our domestic intelligence entities under the Joint Terrorism Task Forces, increase our use of human intelligence to detect and stop terrorists, create regional outreach groups for law enforcement and Muslim communities across America and stop dithering and appoint a national commission on terrorist's use of encrypted technology to strike the right balance between our privacy and law enforcement's need to know what potential terrorists are doing. These five reforms should dramatically improve our chances at preventing another high-casualty attack.

The danger for the Trump administration is there are so many problems that need to be fixed. That makes it all the more important to identify the right problems that are critical for overall success. If President-elect Trump can make solid progress on the three-legged stool of immigration, streamline congressional oversight and DHS to increase accountability and effectiveness, ease the headaches experienced by millions of Americans when they travel for work and fun and get the national security apparatus working noticeably better, he will be well on his way to keeping his promise to voters to make America great (and safer) again.

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