

**Senate Grills Homeland Guard Czar** 06/20/02

By Curt Anderson

The Associated Press

Skeptical lawmakers raised pointed questions Thursday about whether the proposed Homeland Security Department will do a better job of analyzing intelligence than the CIA or the FBI.

President Bush's point man on the new agency, Tom Ridge, insisted it will plug a major gap.

Appearing at back-to-back House and Senate hearings for over eight hours, Ridge found lawmakers almost universally supportive of the new agency but wary of administration claims it will be an independent synthesizer of intelligence able to "connect the dots" to stop terrorist threats.

Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., noted that the administration's plan in many cases would bar the new agency from access to raw intelligence data - tape recordings, communications intercepts, surveillance photos - unless the president gives his approval after the new secretary makes a request. The agency would get scrubbed reports, assessments and analysis from intelligence agencies already under fire for failures before the Sept. 11 terror attacks, including a failure to communicate with each other.

"It seems to me that leaves the problems, the gaps, the cracks, unanswered," Levin said at a hearing of the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee.

"That is a glaring flaw in this proposal," said Rep. Stephen Lynch, D-Mass., during Ridge's session with the House Government Reform Committee.

Ridge, however, said Bush does not want the CIA, FBI, National Security Agency or other intelligence entities moved under the new department's umbrella, as some lawmakers suggest. The vision, he said, is for the new department to bring a fresh perspective and analysis to reports those agencies produce. That would be combined with an assessment of U.S. risks and the ability to take quick action to protect against attacks.

"This would be the only venue where all the information gathered by all the intelligence agencies of the United States could be reviewed," Ridge told the Senate panel. "That integration has never occurred anywhere in the federal government before."

Some Republican lawmakers came to the administration's defense.

Sen. Fred Thompson, R-Tenn., said it was important to have a "firewall" between the massive amounts of intelligence data collected and the analysts at a new department to forestall "the possibility that the new agency would be inundated with truckloads of intelligence data."

The hearings were the first since Bush released detailed plans for the new department. It would combine 100 scattered federal entities with 170,000 employees and total annual budgets of at least \$37 billion. It also marked Ridge's first formal public testimony on Capitol Hill. He previously resisted such appearances on grounds that he is a confidential adviser to the president.

Ridge repeated Bush's summons for Congress to pass legislation creating the department this year, noting that Bush is aiming for a start-up date of Jan. 1. Bush issued an executive order Thursday instructing the Office of Management and Budget to create a transition planning office that Ridge will lead.

"We know the threats are real. We know the need is urgent," Ridge said.

By and large, the bipartisan support that has greeted Bush's proposal since the beginning held true again, as did promises to meet the president's goal of swift passage.

"Slowly but surely won't do it in this case. We must proceed swiftly but surely," said Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., chairman of the Senate committee.

Beyond the intelligence questions, lawmakers raised concerns ranging from the parochial to the global. Issues that came up repeatedly include:

-Whether the non-homeland security duties of agencies such as the Coast Guard and Immigration and Naturalization Service would suffer from a lack of emphasis. Lawmakers from Alaska to Massachusetts worried that fisheries protection and marine search-and-rescue might become lesser priorities for the Coast Guard.

"I think this requires refinement and deep consideration," said Sen. Ted Stevens of Alaska, senior Republican on the Senate Appropriations Committee.

-Solid Democratic opposition to language in the plan that they say could circumvent civil service laws, weaken job protections, muzzle whistleblowers, threaten benefits and jeopardize workplace rights. "We're not going to do that," said Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D.

-Concerns that the agency, far from saving money through efficiency and elimination of duplication, will cost far more than the administration estimates. The president does not plan to ask for any money for it until the 2004 budget year, which many lawmakers say is not realistic.

-An exemption from the Freedom of Information Act for certain information on terrorist threats submitted to the new department. Critics say that would weaken the press and public's ability to assess its performance.

"The public and the Congress should retain their rightful oversight roles," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill.