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Top Five Priorities for Homeland Security in 2012

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By the end of 2011, at least 43 terrorist plots aimed at the United States since 9/11 had been thwarted. The frequency of attempts against the U.S. homeland has increased over the past three years. These numbers are reminders enough that the White House and Congress cannot be complacent—even in a presidential election year, when everything typically is postponed until after the next inauguration. To more effectively combat terrorism and accomplish all the other missions related to homeland security, government needs to recast its priorities and use its resources more efficiently. These five initiatives will help accomplish those goals.

1. Get Visa Waiver Right. The Visa Waiver Program (VWP) allows for visa-free travel—for leisure or business—for up to 90 days among member states. It encourages commerce, tourism, and professional and cultural interchange between allies. The amount of global travel is expected to double over the next 10 years. Unfortunately, right now, the U.S. share of that business is shrinking. If the trend line continues, the U.S. could be shedding jobs in this sector of the economy rather than adding them. On the other hand, if America recaptured its share of international travel, by some estimates, an additional 1 million jobs could be created. The VWP accounts for more than half of the travel to the United States. Therefore, getting this program right has to be the top visa reform priority.

After 9/11, as part of its mission to strengthen national security, the Department of Homeland Security restructured the program to beef up the security requirements and to bring more countries into the program. Nine new countries were brought into an improved VWP. Now, however, current law prevents adding new countries with a visa refusal rate greater than 3 percent until Homeland Security implements a system to track the departure of foreign visitors biometrically (a program that will likely never happen and has nothing to do with the VWP). For both security and economic reasons, it makes sense to judiciously add more countries to the VWP. That will require new legislation that decouples the mandate for biometric exit from the authority of the government to add new countries to the VWP.

2. Stop Stealth Amnesty. In August, the Department of Homeland Security announced it would cease deportation proceedings against illegal immigrants who are attending school, have family in the military, or are primarily responsible for other family members' care, and allow them to apply for

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work permits. This was just one of several initiatives adopted by the Obama Administration as part of a “stealth amnesty” strategy where the government would detain and deport only those who have committed *additional* serious criminal offenses. As an immigration enforcement strategy, Obama’s policies are bound to fail. Unless the federal government rebuilds respect for the rule of law regarding immigration and workplace enforcement, the unlawful population will never be controllable. Likewise, the federal government should stop the legal challenges to state and local government attempts to enforce immigration laws.

3. It Is Time for Merida Two. The U.S. will never secure its southern border without the cooperation of Mexico and reforms that strengthen that country’s security, civil society, and economic freedoms. The Merida Initiative, a George W. Bush-era program to help expand the Mexican military’s capacity to battle transnational criminal cartels, has pretty much run its course. Outreach to the Mexican military has been a particular success. The Mexican military has been increasingly eager to engage with its U.S. counterparts. The U.S. Army’s effort to build capacity in the Mexican military needs to be matched and integrated with other U.S. federal agencies’ efforts. No one is integrating efforts on both sides of the border into a cohesive, proactive whole. It is past time for a more expansive, cooperative initiative for civil-military engagement.

4. Stop Abusing FEMA Declarations. Last year, President Obama set an all-time record for disaster declarations, issuing an average of about one declaration every three days. Every routine disaster receives an onslaught of federal funds. Obama and Congress should put states and localities back in the driver’s seat of disaster response.

Congress should establish clear requirements that limit the types of situations in which declarations can be issued—eliminating some types of disasters entirely from the Federal Emergency Man-

agement Agency’s (FEMA) portfolio. Furthermore, Congress should reduce the cost-share provision for all FEMA declarations to no more than 25 percent of the costs. This will help ensure that at least three-fourths of the costs of a disaster are borne by the taxpayers living where the disaster took place. For catastrophes with a nationwide impact, such as 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, a relief provision could provide a higher federal cost-share where the total costs of the disaster exceed a certain threshold amount.

5. Cancel Most Homeland Security Grants. As the 9/11 Commission predicted, most homeland security grants have become little more than “pork barrel” funding. While federal spending on homeland security has increased exponentially since 9/11, state spending on homeland security has remained almost flat as a percentage of total state appropriations. Instead of assisting states in providing needed services, Washington has acted as an enabler for the states’ addiction to federal funding by requiring little accountability. The grant programs should be scrapped and replaced by more modest and streamlined cooperative agreements in which the federal government and the states negotiate as equal partners and decide the outcomes at the beginning, including programmatic and financial oversight requirements. Cooperative agreements would help target the maximum amount of federal funds toward the highest-risk states, cities, and counties, where the additional funding could *meaningfully* increase the security of Americans.

These are five steps that Congress and the President ought to take now to give us effective and cost-effective homeland security.

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