

Securing our borders is key to reform and requires a serious funding effort

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Since the terrorist attack on Sept. 11, 2001, President Bush, with great fanfare, has declared his commitment to achieving comprehensive immigration reform. Yet the president has failed to act on the most pressing priority of the immigration issue - securing our nation's borders.

As I have long stated, immigration reform cannot be achieved if border security is funded on the cheap. The administration must put real dollars behind initiatives that will close the gaps in our porous border. For too long, we have seen paltry budgets that attempt to close these gaping holes with little more than pocket change.

Last month, the president stood before Congress and emphatically reasserted his determination to act on this vital issue. Once again, his words have not been backed up with real resources.

The president's fiscal year 2009 budget proposes barely a 1 percent increase in funding for border security and enforcement of our immigration laws. It is clear that the president is content to pay lip service instead of making real progress on border security.

Before we can get a handle on illegal immigration we must get control of our borders. Our nation's borders stretch for thousands of miles, yet Congress has had to fight tooth and nail for the money needed to train agents and place them along our borders. From 2005 to 2008, Congress added over \$5.1 billion to the president's request for border security.

Until Congress stepped into the vacuum left by President Bush, agencies such as Immigrations and Customs Enforcement had no choice but to implement a hiring freeze and to release apprehended illegal aliens due to a shortage of personnel and detention facilities.

As the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee and the chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security, I have led efforts in Congress to invest critical dollars in our border security initiatives. I believe it is Congress's duty to close critical gaps in our borders that leave our homeland vulnerable to those who might wish to harm us.

In the fiscal 2005 Iraqi War Supplemental, I worked with Republican colleagues to add emergency funds for additional Border Patrol agents, immigration enforcement personnel, and detention beds. The final legislation funded 500 new Border Patrol agents, 50 new immigration agents, 168 new detention and removal personnel, and 1,950 new detention beds. The White House opposed that funding effort.

In the fiscal 2006 Homeland Security Appropriations bill, the Senate again added funds above the president's budget request for true border security enhancements. We funded a total of 1,000 new Border Patrol agents - 790 above the president's request - as well as additional immigration investigations agents and detention and removal personnel, and provided funds to support more than 20,300 detention beds.

It was not until the president's fiscal 2007 budget request that he finally increased his request for these programs, albeit at insufficient levels. It was up to the Congress, once again, to secure the funding needed for beds and border construction facility.

The 9/11 Commission issued a damning report on the status of our borders:

"More than 500 million people annually cross U.S. borders at legal entry points, about 330 million of them noncitizens. Another 500,000 or more enter illegally without inspection across America's thousands of miles of land borders or remain in the country past the expiration of their permitted stay."

Additionally, the commission concluded that "two systemic weaknesses came together in our border system's inability to contribute to an effective defense against the 9/11 attacks: a lack of well-developed counterterrorism measures as a part of border security and an immigration system not able to deliver on its basic commitments, much less support counterterrorism."

The threat could not be more clear. It is long past time to robustly fund the agencies that act as our first line of defense against future acts of terror. Yet the Congress continues to receive budgets from the president that turn a blind eye to the terror threat. The Democratic Congress last year restored cuts to the Department of Homeland Security that were underfunded by the president and which strengthened efforts to secure our nation's borders.

This year, we are once again tasked with reversing the administration's wrongheaded budget, and providing critical investments for border security. The president has said that his top priority is to defend America. Yet he refuses to adequately fund the most basic homeland security priority, protecting our porous borders.

We cannot make America safer with empty promises. The bricks and mortar of a strong homeland defense begin at our borders. Only then can we begin to tackle the challenge of illegal immigration and reform.

Byrd is chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security.