

OPENING STATEMENT OF  
SENATOR GEORGE V. VOINOVICH, RANKING MEMBER  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT OF GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT,  
THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

“KEEPING THE NATION SAFE DURING THE PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION”

Good afternoon. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this hearing. I think it might be one of the most important hearings we have had this Congress.

Our subcommittee met last week to consider the overall challenges the federal government faces as it prepares for the presidential transition. Today we will examine the particular challenges the Department of Homeland Security faces.

Those challenges stem from the fact that this will be DHS’ first transition and the fact that the Department plays a key role in securing our nation against risks.

I think everyone in this country needs to be cognizant of the fact that there may be a heightened risk of a terrorist attack for the next several months. I make this statement based on history. The USS Cole was bombed one month before our 2000 election and the 9/11 attacks occurred 8 months after our 2000 election.

But not only the U.S. is at risk during transitions.

In 2003, explosives were detonated on a train in Russia 2 days before national elections. Similarly, bombs were set off on trains in Spain 3 days before its 2004 elections. Last year in the

United Kingdom, there were bombing attempts within days of the appointment of the new Prime Minister.

The 9/11 Commission also noted issues with the 2000 presidential transition and found that such transition issues created a dangerous period of vulnerability in the U.S.

I believe the federal government is preparing for the security challenges posed by the presidential transition.

In fact, I have complimented Secretary Chertoff on what I understand is an aggressive preparation effort by DHS. At our last subcommittee hearing, I also complimented OMB's Clay Johnson on the work he is doing across the government to prepare for the transition. I think both the Secretary and Clay know we can't drop the baton on this and the 2009 presidential transition must go smoothly – we must make sure those who are watching our transition efforts know that we are prepared for anything that might happen.

We will hear today from DHS and the National Academy of Public Administration about how DHS, with the Council for Excellence in Government, is preparing for the transition.

I worked with NAPA when I was a mayor, so I know the good work they do and look forward to hearing from them.

Today we will also have an opportunity to discuss what more can be done – by DHS, Congress, and the next Administration – to solidify the transition actions DHS has already taken.

I am anxious to discuss several areas where I think we can build on the good work that has already been done.

First, many transition reports suggest the need to provide security clearances for new officials in a timely manner. I agree.

In fact, the Chairman and I have been working to bring a performance-based approach to how the government manages access to sensitive national security information since 2004.

Because of those efforts, the executive branch's Joint Security and Suitability Reform Team produced a plan to reform the security clearance process in April. I am interested in whether our witnesses think that plan will help new officials get clearances more quickly.

Second, I am interested in exploring how DHS' human capital challenges could negatively impact the transition.

NAPA's report notes that a "large number of vacancies is a major gap in DHS' career leadership structure."

There is quite a vacancy at DHS. 139 of the Department's executive positions were vacant on March 20, 2008. That's almost 20 percent of its leadership positions. I'm not sure why those positions are not filled and wonder whether DHS is being hamstrung by legislative hiring requirements.

A number of transition studies note that career executives must provide stability during transitions, so we must make sure DHS has the necessary authorities to hire the employees it needs.

Mr. Chairman, you and I have worked to provide agencies the tools they need to hire the

right person for the right job at the right time. Ms. Duke, we remain open to discussing additional tools you need to meet the Department's hiring needs.

On a related note, today I hope to hear from Under Secretary Duke about the Department's plans to reduce the number of non-career FEMA executives.

FEMA executives must have the qualifications necessary to manage emergencies and disasters, and I do not think non-career executives should fill 34 percent of FEMA's executive positions.

This is especially true since the government-wide average of non-career executives is 15 percent. I wonder whether Congress should mandate that more of FEMA's positions be career positions, especially the Regional Administrator positions.

This afternoon I also look forward to discussing how this administration and the next, as well as Congress, can best reach out to the public regarding the transition, as NAPA and others recommend. I think we need to discuss possible risks to the nation during the transition period, but also provide assurances that the government is preparing to address those risks and will leave no stone unturned in its efforts.

Essentially, we need to send the message that transitions bring risks, but we are alert and ready to address those risks!

I also hope we can discuss how the federal government's transition preparations can and should be coordinated with state and local governments and the presidential campaigns.

I want to thank our witnesses for joining us to discuss what I believe is a matter of critical importance. I appreciate your time and look forward to hearing from each of you.

I want to especially thank Ms. McGinnis for all of her work at the Council for Excellence in Government.

I recall working with Pat when I served as the keynote speaker at a CEG/Washington Post forum on human capital in 2006. That experience and others over the years lead me to believe that because of Pat's leadership, the Council has become a leading organization in promoting performance based management and providing government leaders with tools to effectively carry out their responsibilities. Pat, the Council's programs and publications have proven to be a valuable resource and are a testament to your leadership. Thank you for your service.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.