

Department Authorization Bill Falls By The Wayside, Again

Wednesday, Sept. 24, 2008

by [Chris Strohm](#)

For another year, Congress will adjourn without passing legislation directing the sprawling Homeland Security Department's operations and spending, according to lawmakers and aides.

For months, House and Senate Democrats said they hoped Congress would complete an annual authorization bill for the department, which has grown in size and budget every year since its inception in 2003.

But any chance that an FY09 Homeland Security authorization bill would pass before Congress adjourns for the year has faded because Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Chairman **Joseph Lieberman** will not bring such a bill before his committee, his spokeswoman said.

"The senator determined that, given the pressing work that still needs to be completed by the end of this session, the shortened legislative schedule, and the number of parties involved in negotiations, there would not be enough time to mark up the DHS reauthorization bill," the spokeswoman said.

Congressional aides said it was not clear if Democratic leaders would allow Lieberman to bring an authorization bill to the Senate floor, given that he is backing Sen. **John McCain**, R-Ariz., for president and was a featured speaker at the GOP convention in Minnesota this month.

The absence of an authorization bill in the Senate has derailed plans by House Homeland Security Chairman **Bennie Thompson**.

Thompson opted not to have his committee pass an authorization bill this year. It was the first time the committee has not done such a bill since 2004.

Instead, he directed the committee to mark up smaller, "mini-authorization" bills. He then planned to roll those smaller bills into an authorization bill the House approved in 2007, and conference that with a Senate authorization bill.

More than a dozen homeland security bills hang in limbo, including legislation intended to reduce overclassification, strengthen the department's office of bombing prevention, help people get off terrorist watch lists and improve the government's ability to use forensics to identify the origin of a nuclear bomb or a radiological dispersion device, also called a "dirty bomb."

"This is an absolute failure by House Democrats," House Homeland Security ranking member **Peter King** said.

"They abdicated their responsibility to guide the Department of Homeland Security by not passing an authorization bill and thought they could avoid blame by trying to pass the buck to the Senate," King added. "Well, it didn't work."

Thompson's chief of staff, Lanier Avant, fired back. He said the House did its job by passing a DHS authorization bill during the 110th Congress, meaning the bill that was passed in 2007.

"It was the chairman's preference that the House and Senate act during the 110th Congress to pass an authorization bill. Unfortunately, only the House saw fit to do so," Avant said.

"We've done everything we can do to get the bills to become law," he added. "We got them through the full House and we don't control the actions of the other body. There is nothing we can do short of Senate action."

Avant said the House Homeland Security Committee will mark up an authorization bill in 2009.

Congress has never sent a final authorization bill to the White House because it either did not get through the full House or was never taken up in the Senate.

Copyright ©2008 by National Journal Group Inc. The Watergate 600 New Hampshire Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20037

202-739-8400 • fax 202-833-8069 NationalJournal.com is an Atlantic Media publication.