

Homeland Security Advisor Ridge Discusses Homeland Security Department

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GOVERNOR RIDGE: Good morning all. I want to thank my colleagues, Secretary Norton and Evans and Mineta and Thompson for joining us this morning. As was released to you, I believe earlier this morning, the President's Cabinet, in a very unique letter, have asked Senator Daschle and Senator Lott, as they continue to consider the creation of the department of homeland security, to deal with an issue that is critical to the President's national security authority.

In a letter sent to the Hill this morning, signed by the 14 Cabinet heads, we remind the Senate leadership that under the existing legislation being considered by the Senate of the United States, while the President would have national security authority as it relates to the 14 existing departments, the way it is presently written, the new department, the proposed department of homeland security would not have this same authority.

And the reason we are calling your attention to this is we think it's a rather perverse set of circumstances. Whereas the President would have national security authority as it relates to every other department in his Cabinet, at this time we're at war -- a war that the President has said, and I think America understands a war against terrorism, that's going to take a great deal of patience in a relentless pursuit of these terrorists around this country and around the world, as we propose the creation of a new department of homeland security, the Senate is prepared to take away an authority that presently exists as it applies to the 14 other Cabinet level departments, but would not apply to the new department of homeland security. A rather perverse set of circumstances.

So we call on the Senate leadership to do two things: One, to make sure that the President would retain -- remember, they are literally taking authority away -- existing authority from the President of the United States. We call on the Senate leadership to insist that the President be able to have the same kind of executive authority, executive discretion over the new department of homeland security in the measure that is being presently considered.

And two, that they pass, that they work this week or next week, however long it takes, and pass the legislation and get it to the conference committee so that the House and the Senate can work out their differences, to get to the President's desk a measure that protects this country, that preserves his national security authority, that permanently reorganizes the government as we deal with the enduring vulnerability of this country against the threat of international terrorism.

Now, I've asked Secretary Mineta -- obviously, oversees one of the largest departments in the federal government -- to share with you a couple of thoughts about the ability for the President to retain -- retain -- they are using the department of homeland security legislation -- again, I can't reiterate it enough -- to actually take away presidential authority that exists today as we stand here. But if some of the Senate had their way, once this bill was passed, the President would not have this authority as it relates to the new department. So I've asked Secretary Mineta to share a couple thoughts with you about it.

SECRETARY MINETA: Thank you very much, Governor Ridge. For the past 40 years, ever since federal workers were allowed to unionize, the President has retained government-wide authority to exempt federal agencies from collective bargaining requirements if the agency's primary function revolves around national security work. In 1978, this position was codified into federal law, and it has worked well ever since.

And I speak from experience. I am the Cabinet officer who has had the most recent experience of building a new agency, the Transportation Security Administration, the largest undertaking of its kind since World War II. The flexibility called for in the President's request for legislation that establishes the department of homeland security was critical to our success in standing up the TSA, and I wholeheartedly endorse this approach.

The enemy is fast and nimble, and we must be, as well. And so this proposal ensures that the President will have the tools to meet a rapidly changing threat.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Again, we call on the Senate leadership to make sure that the President retains his executive discretion and prerogative as it relates to national security in this new department, and two, that they go about the business of fashioning the new department and getting -- working with this administration and with their House colleagues to get a measure to the President's desk that protects this country, so that he can sign it.

Yes.

Q Are there any negotiations going on at all between the White House and --

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Yes, there are. Obviously, we have continued to work with Senator Nelson and Senator Chafee and Senator Breaux, continue at the staff level to exchange language with them. We made some compromises, working with the House. They were satisfactory addressing the needs of some of the House members, and certainly some of the concerns that the President has. We have basically taken the same posture with our friends in the Senate. And we continue to exchange language.

It appears now they may be in not only this week, but potentially next week, so the opportunity to get something done still exists and we want to continue to find that common ground so we can get a measure to the conference committee and get a bill to the President.

Q Are you done compromising?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: No, our door -- the door is still open. We continue to exchange ideas. We continue to exchange language. Again, we understand that the -- certain members of the Senate have some very specific concerns. We share some of those same concerns. But we both start from the same premise: One, we understand that these men and women that presently work for the federal government are patriots all. They have been doing homeland security work for years, if not decades -- long before we even fashioned the notion that we would reorganize the government around a new department of homeland security. That is a given.

And yet there are still legitimate concerns that some of the members of the Senate have with regard to their collective bargaining rights. We've assured them they've got all these -- the civil service protections that they've had. Whistle-blower protection, Hatch Act protection, civil rights protection -- those are preserved. There's still some other language we're working on.

As the same time as we try to address their concerns, they need to understand -- and that's the reason for this very unique letter that went to the Hill today -- for the President to have national security authority, as it relates to the existing 14 departments and agencies, but not to be given -- actually to have that authority withdrawn by action of the Senate, have that authority taken away, as it relates to the new department of homeland security, just seems to be perverse and just it's the wrong thing for the Senate to be even considering at this time. So we ask them take care of that issue and we'll continue to work with the Senate to find common ground.

Q Governor, this issue involves labor-management issues that's been sort of that the core of both parties' bases. Is it really politically possible to do anything on this before the elections?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Well, I think it is. I think if you take a look at the good-faith effort between members of the House and the administration, we're able to fashion language that addressed concerns of the legislative body, as well as the executive branch. We know the same language and the same approach has been rejected by the Senate. It doesn't mean that we can't continue to work, and certainly doesn't mean we shouldn't continue to work with the leadership up there and with some of the individual members to see if we can find the right language that satisfies everybody.

Q Governor, just to change the topic a little, given the recent spate of incidents involving apparent terrorism, is there any thought of changing the color code from yellow up to orange?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: As you know, the Attorney General, the Office of Homeland Security and those involved with that decision-making process review the intelligence information on a daily basis. Last week, in response to the bin Laden statement, the Zawahiri statement, and I think that time there may have been the explosion in Yemen with the tanker, the FBI sent out an alert to state and local law enforcement and different -- several different Cabinet departments and agencies, alerted the private sector to review the protective measures that

they've undertaken, and if, in light of those statements, they thought they should ratchet some of the protective measures and enhance security, we encourage them to do so.

But again, that's an assessment we make on a day-to-day basis, and we'll continue to do so.

Q Governor, you said that there are existing protections, as far as whistle-blowers are concerned, to protect workers from being either hired or fired on political bases. Where are those in what you all have proposed? What is it that protects the workers?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: There is specific language -- well, there is specific language and assurance that has been given -- specific language in the House bill and within the Senate bill. Right now most of the debate and the disagreement is to whether or not the President should be able to exercise his national security authority, in the light of a conflict between a collective bargaining matter and a national security interest.

But the traditional, historic, civil service protections -- Hatch Act, whistle-blower, civil rights -- those protections exist. That's no longer a Senate piece of this debate. That has been defused by agreement between the legislative branch and the executive branch.

Q Governor, different subject, sir?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Yes.

Q As you know, the Beltway region has been terrorized recently by these sniper shootings. Is this type of crime something that your office is focused on and you're concerned with at this point? What role exactly are you all playing?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: I will tell you that anyone -- I think the entire country is concerned about these series of murders. And everyone within the White House, beginning with the President of the United States on his daily briefings, gets reports from the FBI as to the current state of the investigation. So it appears that the law enforcement community, both federal, state and local, is cooperating at an unprecedented level. Of course, those of you who have been following it know that they have had some leads and they're getting a lot of tips that they're following up very, very aggressively.

Someone asked me the other day if it's a terrorist attack, and I think the families believe it is, the community is terrorized. Whether or not it may fall in a more limited definition of an attack predicated upon or in an attempt to achieve some political result remains to be seen. I don't think we can foreclose that. Certainly, the FBI and no one in the White House has foreclosed it.

But right now, we're just hoping that citizens continue to come forward, be as helpful as they possibly can. The law enforcement community is working as hard as they possibly can. As I said before, we have a daily briefing every morning with the President of the United States, and part of the President's briefing is a status report on the investigation relative to these murders.

Q When you say you don't think you can foreclose on it, are you talking about you don't think you can foreclose links to international terror?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: I think it would be premature to draw any conclusions until we get all of the facts and ultimately apprehend the individual or individuals responsible.

Q Is there any reason to believe that it is?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: There's no reason to believe one way or the other.

Q No evidence --

GOVERNOR RIDGE: No evidence at this point. But, again, unfortunately, under these horrific circumstances, you don't want to draw any premature conclusions. We need to apprehend the individual or the individuals first, and then determine what diabolical, what evil, what mind-set causes someone to murder innocent -- innocent people.

Q Governor, back to homeland security. If it doesn't pass in the next two weeks, is it never going to happen?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Well, I am an optimist that we still have an opportunity to get it done in the next couple

weeks at least get a measure through the Senate, get it into -- hopefully -- I believe it will be coming back after the election, and if we can get a good measure through the Senate, get it with the conferees with the House. We could have a measure -- again, we need a measure that the President will sign on his desk by the end of the year. I still think it can be done.

Obviously, I believe that it needs to be done sooner or later, and in terms of maximizing our effort as a country, to reorganize ourselves, the way to bring maximum security, to take advantage of all these hundreds of thousands of people who have been working on homeland security issues, to ultimately do the best we can with the human resources and the technology that we have available to improve our security, I think we need the department. So I believe we'll get it sooner or later and the President and everybody else in this country, I think, would rather have it sooner.

Thank you.

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