



U.S. Department of
Homeland Security

Center for Homeland Defense And Security Commencement Remarks as Prepared By Acting Secretary Chad F. Wolf

Release Date: December 17, 2020

Thank you, Glenn, for that introduction.

Good morning, graduates. It is an honor to join you virtually to celebrate this momentous occasion and to congratulate each of you for your dedication and hard work.

Today's event is a celebration of your commitment and tenacity, and each of you should take pride in this achievement. It's important to remember that no one reaches this type of accomplishment alone, so it is only proper that we also recognize your family members, loved ones, mentors, and colleagues who have made up your support system.

Let me give a special thanks to the Naval Postgraduate School Center for Homeland Defense and Security for inviting me to speak to you all today.

I'll state the obvious and say that 2020 has been a challenging year, but it's important that we have all come together today for this important milestone in your careers.

CHDS has existed in parallel with the Department since its very inception. For 17 years, CHDS has provided leaders like yourselves the opportunity to obtain an advanced degree in the field of homeland security.

Having been around the Department since its inception in 2003, I can tell you firsthand that the Department is one of the most complex organizations within the federal government. Our diverse mission set alone covers a wide variety of homeland security challenges.

From the Coast Guard medical teams deploying to the border, to ICE and CBP buttressing the Federal Protective Service's defense of federal property, to FEMA marshalling the response efforts of CISA, CBP, TSA, US Coast Guard and Secret Service in the wake of hurricanes and COVID-19, this agility is precisely what DHS was designed to accomplish.

Today's complex world of homeland security requires individuals who understand its authorities, resources, and mission sets.

The CHDS program is also unique in that it provides a one-of-a-kind forum that brings together local, state, tribal, territorial, federal, and private sector leaders to learn, debate, and solve many of the ongoing challenges we face at the Department every day.

You all come from different backgrounds and disciplines – which you've brought to your cohort and has made your experience here at CHDS all that more rewarding.

In reviewing your cohort, I was struck by this diversity. Your class hails from every corner of the homeland security network—including the Department of Defense, federal, state, and local law enforcement, DHS component entities, and other critical emergency services.

This varied make-up tells us that homeland security is a team sport and a shared mission requiring broad partnerships across the government and private sectors. We are smartly focusing our resources on those who are on the ground working with and alongside our local communities.

At the end of the day, the 240,000 men and women of the Department are not alone in securing the Homeland. The success we have had over the past 17 years is because of professionals like you that are on the frontlines and a part of the fight every day in your communities.

The Department of Homeland Security's defining characteristic since our founding is our ability to adapt and overcome. The Department's mission is anything but easy. It is one that is increasingly complex and expansive – one that transcends borders, mission-sets, and threat-streams.

In September of this year, I delivered the annual State of the Homeland address to our workforce – some of you from the Department may have had the chance to watch it. During that address, I said that America is more prepared and more equipped to tackle the threats to the Homeland than ever before.

That's not because we have the latest tools – although we do. It's not because we have the latest more intelligence – although we do. It's because we have some of the most dedicated

public servants inside the Department and committed stakeholders that work hand-in-hand with us on a daily basis.

As you are all well aware, we face a myriad of evolving threats. Our threat environment is not static. It is important that we educate and build our next homeland security leaders for the threats of tomorrow.

When the Department was created almost two decades ago, the threat from radical Islamic terrorism and foreign terrorist organizations was first and foremost in our minds, with the overriding goal of preventing another 9/11. And, thankfully, we have succeeded.

The Department's counterterrorism mission is what I call our core competency. It's why we were established. And while we continue to excel at that mission, over time we have seen other threats arise that require different solutions sets—threats such as transnational organized crime, humanitarian and national security crises at our border, natural disasters and pandemics, the rise of China and other malign nation-state actors.

Today's threats are more multifaceted and sophisticated than ever. When the Department was stood up, it was before iPhones existed that could be used to control drones.

Before terrorists used cryptocurrency to fund their exploits.

Before foreign nation states used social media to proliferate their disinformation campaigns.

And before foreign adversaries leveraged the exponential advancement of technology to wreak havoc on our ever-evolving e-commerce.

In 2020, threats are dynamic and the need for operational flexibility is paramount. The best way to maintain that flexibility is by ensuring homeland security leaders like yourselves have the latest tools and education for the job ahead.

The success of DHS, and by proxy our partners across the local, state, territorial, tribal, and federal sectors, can be largely attributed to the selflessness, agility, and dedication of the people who have chosen to protect our homeland.

Over the last several years, we have seen a considerable change in our mission sets – to include repeated border security crises, domestic terrorism and homegrown violent extremism, civil unrest, a global pandemic, malign influence from foreign competitors such as China, and threats to cyber and infrastructure security.

As we look ahead, terrorism, criminal actions threatening public safety, natural disasters, and pandemics will remain enduring threats to the Homeland.

But what concerns us the most is the growing influence and threat of nation-states launching new and aggressive tactics here in the homeland through cyber and economic means.

While predicting the future is difficult, a sober analysis of current and evolving threats gives us some insight into what we can expect.

Though we have dismantled and destroyed many adversaries through our counterterrorism measures over the years, we should expect them to continue to adapt and find ways to target the homeland.

Radical Islamic terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda, ISIS, Hezbollah, and others have proven to be remarkably resilient. These adversaries still have the desire to target the homeland and kill Americans.

We should be fully prepared to leverage our partnerships across all levels of government to prepare for these potentialities.

The Department will always prioritize preventing terrorists from entering our country to harm our people and our way of life. But as we have gotten better at our job of protecting the homeland, our adversaries have adapted their tactics to advance their agenda of terror.

We have seen this threat transcend over the years from foreign terrorist organizations traveling to the U.S. – to organizations directing and inspiring terrorist attacks – to lone individuals here in the Homeland who have become radicalized over the Internet. The power of social media and encrypted apps and chat rooms have made our job all the more challenging.

Over the last several years, we have faced a growing threat from domestic terrorism and other threats originating at home, including mass attacks that have struck our houses of worship, our schools, our workplaces, and our shopping centers.

Recognizing this evolution, last year DHS released our *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*. This strategy outlines how we are using the tools and expertise that have protected and strengthened the country from FTOs to address the evolving challenges of today.

One aspect of the framework provides a comprehensive look at the preventative tools that the Department can bring to bear to these threats, regardless of the varying ideological or non-ideological drivers. But the Department cannot effectively prevent violence alone – this approach involves our partners across all government sectors, the private sector, law enforcement, and community leaders to help protect their communities.

Continuing to implement our *Strategic Framework* will help position the Department and our partners to successfully address the changing nature of the domestic threat in the years to come.

Just as the threat of terrorism has endured and evolved since the start of our Department, so too has the threat at our borders. The evolution of Transnational Criminal Organizations, who control pathways for drugs and migrants crossing our borders, continue to pose a threat to every American. What happens at our borders does not impact only our border community. Chicago, New York, and Miami are all impacted by illegal activity at our borders.

We must continue to mitigate the threat posed by human and drug smugglers and the transnational criminal organizations that employ them.

As we noted in our first-ever *Homeland Threat Assessment*, Mexico-based cartels pose the greatest threat to the Homeland because of their ability to control territory—including along the

U.S. Southwest Border—and co-opt parts of the Mexican government, particularly at a state and local level.

We can see the deadly toll of cartels in our own communities. I'm sure many of you have seen the impact of the cartels in your respective professions. Every year we lose over 70,000 Americans to drug overdoses, and many of these deadly drugs are pushed into our country by the cartels.

These same cartels also control the pathways that migrants use to travel to the United States. They exploit migrants by engaging in forced labor and sex trafficking.

One of the most effective ways to protect our border and enhance our immigration security is to adopt a forward leaning posture, which “pushes out our borders.” What this means, in effect, is enacting policies and enforcing our laws on the front lines of where the threats exist before they are given the opportunity to penetrate our physical borders.

The Department has been hard at work with our Central American partners – working with them to build stability, security, and prosperity in the region. A stable Central America is good for the security of our Homeland. We have entered into over a dozen different agreements with our partners focusing on security, capacity building, and biometric collection.

Additionally, DHS components including the U.S. Coast Guard, Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, Customs and Border Protection are on the frontlines intercepting dangerous drugs and working with our international partners to stop criminal elements before they can reach our shores.

As we look toward the future of homeland security, we must continue to lean in and target threats where they exist—before they can threaten American communities. We should continue to build upon this proactive strategy and stop TCOs, smugglers, and other criminals in their tracks.

For most of the Department's history, non-state actors featured prominently among the Department's top threats. In recent years, however, nation states including China, Iran, and Russia evolved as threats to our homeland, with China being the most significant long-term threat to Americans, the Homeland, and to the American way of life.

In the authoritarian grip of the Chinese Communist Party, China will continue to threaten the homeland in several ways, including:

- Engaging in disinformation campaigns designed to mislead the American public, pressure political figures, shape U.S. discourse in China's favor, and shift responsibility for the deadly COVID-19 pandemic to others;
- Using operatives to lobby our state and local governments – public officials in your own communities – to adopt pro-China policies at the expense of Americans in our hometowns;
- Leveraging economic power to manipulate major American companies—from Hollywood to the hardwood—into toeing the Party line at the expense of truth and free expression;
- Engaging in massive cyber campaigns, including against the U.S. government, national critical infrastructure, and private industry;
- Sending counterfeit goods, including fake medicines, contaminated cosmetics, defective auto parts, and fake personal protective equipment;
- Stealing trade secrets and using foreign investment to weaken the U.S. industrial base;
- Exploiting our academic and visa systems to advance the Chinese military and economy; and
- Flooding our streets with Chinese-made fentanyl and precursors which helps enrich criminal organizations and kills Americans.

China poses the greatest civilizational threat to our country since the Soviet Union during the height of the Cold War. Like the USSR, China seeks to become a global superpower, reshaping the world in its own image. China is exporting its brand of authoritarianism, stealing our information, and influencing us from within.

Going forward, we must educate the public on the severity of the Chinese threat. The Chinese Communist Party is targeting everything from our national discourse to individual companies.

Put simply, they are targeting every aspect of society.

This is where you, as law enforcement officers and public officials, will play an increasingly important role. In addition to increasing public understanding, nothing short of a whole-of-society approach is needed in order to properly address this threat in the future.

In response to the rising threat from China we have taken both operational and policy actions that will posture the Department as a leader in the fight against Chinese aggression in the future.

The Department will soon release a *Strategic Action Plan to Counter the People's Republic of China and Defend the Homeland in the Era of Great Power Competition*.

This action plan will not only outline a strategy for how the Department can counter malign activities of the PRC in the Homeland but will also discuss specific actions we can take to ensure we protect the Homeland from threats emanating from Beijing.

If our country is to overcome emerging threats, we must do everything within our power to maintain our economic security.

I often say, “economic security is homeland security.” This phrase is particularly accurate when it comes to China’s actions against our economy. The CCP makes no secret of its desire to replace America as the world’s economic leader, in addition to its desire to replace us as the global leader.

In the near future, we can expect both nation-states like China and non-state actors to threaten our economy by flouting international trade agreements and norms, engaging in fraud and counterfeiting, and abusing our immigration system.

We must also prepare to stem the flow of goods produced with slave labor from entering our markets, which, in addition to threatening the ability of law-abiding businesses to compete on a level playing field, also disrespects the inherent dignity and natural rights of human beings that we hold dear as Americans.

DHS directly supports economic security every day by keeping commercial airline travel safe and secure, facilitating commercial trade through our ports of entry, keeping our supply chains free from economic disruptions and safeguarding our ports and inland waterways that process nearly 90% of all goods coming into our country.

Our trade enforcement protects American businesses and consumers, and it ensures that we are globally competitive. CBP enforces our trade laws, and implements trade remedies to protect vital U.S. industries that are especially vulnerable to unfair trade practices. We will not

let illicit actors threaten American innovation, our economy, or our business competitiveness, and we protect the livelihoods of American workers and the health and safety of consumers, every day.

As critical as trade is to our prosperity, it is also targeted for exploitation by terrorists and criminals. Our dedicated law enforcement officers are able to disrupt terrorist financing, target fraud and counterfeits, and ensure trade transparency.

Addressing threats at the earliest possible point is essential to strengthening the security of our country and enables us to improve the free flow of legitimate goods.

Successful trade facilitation is what makes the United States globally competitive, ensuring that the supply chain is efficient, cost effective, and safe.

Now more than ever, the world's economy has become more virtual and the Department's presence in this space never more vital.

One of the most important ways we can protect our economic prosperity in the future is by improving our cybersecurity capabilities and shoring up the resiliency of our national critical infrastructure.

Of all the threats I have witnessed in my time at DHS, none has evolved as quickly as the threats to our critical infrastructure and computer networks. Whether the threat comes from nation-state actors, non-state actors, or shadowy groups working on behalf of an unknown client, we should expect the cyber domain to only grow in importance during the next decade.

Many of these threats may likely be scaled up versions of what we have already seen, including the spread of disinformation campaigns, attempts to disrupt elections, steal intellectual property, and attempts to hack critical infrastructure and hold private industry hostage to ransomware.

Recognizing the important role cybersecurity and infrastructure security will play in the future, the Department, working with Congress, created our newest operating component - the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) - in 2018, and CISA has enjoyed remarkable success in the last two years. As we look toward the next ten years, I fully expect CISA to continue playing a leading role in mitigating the threats posed to our homeland in the cyber domain.

Success in cyber and infrastructure security requires buy-in from a variety of stakeholders, across government and the private sector. CISA is doing an incredible job bridging the public and private sectors and creating an environment for the sharing of critical information and intelligence.

Though each of the threats I have outlined are diverse, they do share some common themes.

First, they will require robust partnerships across local, tribal, territorial, state, and federal agencies. If I have learned anything in my time as Acting Secretary, it is that none of us can go it alone when it comes to securing the homeland.

Second, we will need to make sure DHS is properly resourced and organized for the emerging threats I've described earlier. The Department is one of the youngest agencies in the federal government – and that comes with both advantages, such as flexibility and agility, and challenges. The Department is being given new missions and with that comes a competition for resources – both within the Department and within the interagency.

Finally, our partnerships will only be successful if we have the right people and tools in place. This includes leaders like yourselves. I am not exaggerating when I say the future of homeland security is in your hands.

Daunting as that may sound, there are some effective lessons I have learned during my career that may help you along the way.

First, be ready for the opportunity and rise to the occasion and simply work harder than others. I began my homeland security shortly after the attacks on 9/11, joining the newly created Transportation Security Administration armed only with an innate desire to make a difference and no defined job title. That desire fueled my work ethic then and it continues to do so today. I encourage you all to find that same passion and leverage it to work as hard as you can in whatever position you occupy.

Second, lead by example and stay calm, especially when others do not. When you work hard, stay humble, and remain above the fray during chaotic situations, others will do the same.

Third, build a strong team, understand your limitations, and get comfortable being uncomfortable. You will run into stressful situations that are beyond your abilities and you cannot afford to be afraid to ask for help. You can't be all things to all people or all topics, so don't be afraid to lean on others when you need them. And surround yourself with folks who are smarter than you.

Fourth, ensure you are properly communicating the homeland security mission—especially with leaders. Many Americans are uncertain as to what we do at DHS and even more do not understand the breadth of our mission set. Homeland security is a complex enterprise, and it is important the American people understand why we are investing in the Department, this center, and folks like yourselves.

The homeland security mission is not something that should be undertaken by the faint of heart. This mission must be driven by those who firmly entrust themselves to protecting our homeland despite the many challenges that we face.

Remember—nothing can intimidate you. Not cyber attacks or transnational criminal activity. Not a global pandemic or the pains of civil unrest. Not Mother Nature’s storms. And not those malign actors seeking to bring storms of their own to our shores.

I’ll leave you with one final piece of advice – stay in touch with your fellow graduates. This is a small community and you never know where your careers will take you. When I first started on Capitol Hill 20 years ago, I worked alongside a junior staffer who is currently the OMB Director – and I worked directly for not one but two future Defense Secretaries. Back at TSA in 2002, I hired a young lawyer who would eventually become the 6th Homeland Security Secretary and my future boss. The moral of the story – you never know where your professional life will lead and how the lasting relationships will benefit you down the road. Take care of those relationships and nurture them – even if the immediate benefit isn’t obvious.

On behalf of Americans everywhere, thank you for your service and sacrifice. We are a better country because of your contributions.

But most importantly – congratulations on a remarkable achievement.

Thank you.

Topics: [Secretary of Homeland Security \(/topics/secretary-homeland-security\)](/topics/secretary-homeland-security).

Keywords: [Acting Secretary Chad Wolf \(/keywords/acting-secretary-chad-wolf\)](/keywords/acting-secretary-chad-wolf), [Department of Homeland Security \(DHS\) \(/keywords/dhs\)](/keywords/dhs), [Speech \(/keywords/speech\)](/keywords/speech).

Last Published Date: December 17, 2020