

Ridge to step down as US homeland security chief

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Another high-level Bush administration official announced his departure Tuesday, with Tom Ridge saying he would step down in February as secretary of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

Ridge was the first person to head the new department, formally established in January 2003. The huge new internal security organization combines 22 previously separate and distinct government agencies, ranging from the Coast Guard to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Ridge was previously selected by Bush in October 2001 as a homeland security adviser serving in the White House, supposedly coordinating homeland defense policy in the same way that national security adviser Condoleezza Rice coordinated foreign policy.

Bush appointed Ridge after the September 11 terrorist attacks, and only a few days after the first of the anthrax mailings on the East Coast, which ultimately killed five people. The Bush administration's response to the anthrax attacks was widely condemned as inept and panicky, and Ridge was given the responsibility for presenting a more reassuring public face to domestic security measures.

Within a year, however, Ridge had become the object of widespread derision, the butt of jokes about the color-coded warning system adopted by the Bush administration and his own well-publicized call for every American to stockpile duct tape as a precaution against chemical, biological or nuclear terrorist attacks.

When a group of Senate Democrats and Republicans called for the establishment of a new federal department of homeland security, in the fall of 2001, the Bush administration rejected the idea. For a time, the White House even waged a legal battle to prevent Congress from calling Ridge to testify on Capitol Hill, claiming this would violate the separation of powers since Ridge was a White House adviser.

In the summer of 2002, however, amid mounting revelations about the Bush administration's disregard of warnings of impending terrorist attacks in the months leading up to September 11, the White House concluded that it needed the new department as political cover. Bush shifted his position to back the Senate bill that had been introduced by Democrat Joseph Lieberman and Republican John McCain. Once the department was established, Bush nominated Ridge to head it.

The Department of Homeland Security served multiple purposes for the Bush administration, all of which have little to do with protecting the American people from further terrorist attacks.

It provided a necessary diversion from any serious examination of the Bush administration's own conduct before and on September 11, as well as a cover for subsequent security debacles, like the failure to find the individual—most likely a former US biological weapons scientist—who carried out the anthrax attacks.

The new department provided a political club to use against critics of the Bush administration. First, in the 2002 congressional election, Republicans campaigned as supporters of the Department of Homeland Security—although Bush had initially rejected it—and portrayed the Democrats as undermining domestic security because they had demanded that federal government workers transferred to the new department retain their union representation rights. At least one incumbent Senate Democrat, Max Cleland of Georgia, was defeated for reelection on this issue, after the Republicans sponsored television commercials picturing him side-by-side with Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein.

Throughout the 2004 presidential election campaign, the DHS served as an instrument for raising public fears about new terrorist attacks whenever it served the political purposes of the Bush reelection campaign. This included

the announcement by Ridge and Attorney General John Ashcroft, in the midst of the Democratic National Convention, of alleged new terror threats to buildings in New York City, Washington and Newark, New Jersey.

Ridge provoked considerable criticism even in the tame US media when he issued a report on homeland security attributing the absence of new terrorist attacks on US soil since September 11 to “the president’s leadership” on the issue. The former Pennsylvania governor’s repeated claims that “we don’t do politics” at the Department of Homeland Security were undercut by the peculiar—and frequent—coincidence between declines in Bush’s standing in the polls and new warnings from the department about imminent terrorist attacks.

As an institution, the Department of Homeland Security was another vehicle through which the Bush administration could prosecute its basic social agenda: attacking the working class and favoring the wealthy and corporate America. The 180,000 employees of the new department have been largely stripped of civil service protection and union representation, with the administration ceaselessly presenting workers’ rights as an obstacle to an effective struggle against terrorism.

Most recently, it has been revealed that all department employees are being compelled to sign nondisclosure agreements that prohibit them from sharing even unclassified information with the public, Congress or the press. Two federal employee unions, in a joint statement November 29, called the agreements “unprecedented restrictions and conditions on free speech rights” whose purpose was to prevent whistle-blowing and provide “a convenient device for officials to suppress and cover up evidence of their own misconduct or malfeasance.”

The DHS has slavishly served the interests of corporate America. Although terrorist attacks on oil and chemical plants could potentially threaten the health and even the lives of millions of people, the DHS backed off on plans to impose new safety rules on such facilities after a meeting of industry lobbyists with Bush’s chief political adviser Karl Rove. While Ridge insisted that he must have unchecked administrative authority over his own department’s workforce, including the right to hire and fire at will, he declared that he had no authority at all over American businesses.

More fundamentally, the establishment of the DHS provides the framework for a future police state in America, by centralizing 22 separate agencies with responsibilities for domestic policing and emergency management, ranging from border control to disaster

relief to baggage inspection and passenger checking at US airports. Previous administrations rejected such a huge consolidation on the grounds that it would spark fears of a federal Big Brother. The Bush administration has no such reservations.

Ridge’s own resignation undercuts the central premise for his department’s existence: the claim that the Bush administration is engaged in a “global war on terror” that is the defining struggle of the twenty-first century. If that myth were true, Ridge’s decision to quit would be tantamount to desertion in wartime.

The departing secretary, like CIA Director George Tenet when he stepped down in July, cited the desire to spend more time with his family. His announcement included a few maudlin phrases about wanting to see more of his son’s high school rugby games. It would have been unthinkable for a high-ranking military or defense official in World War II to have made a similar excuse for abandoning his responsibilities.

As in every action of the Bush administration, Ridge’s resignation reveals the enormous social gulf between the American ruling class and ordinary working people. An executive like Ridge can leave the field of battle when he pleases, whether to rake in a seven-figure corporate salary or prepare to seek higher political office.

There are no doubt many soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan, largely drawn from the ranks of the working class, who would like to spend more time with their families, see their sons play baseball, or return to jobs that pay better than their military stipends. They are not permitted to do so, however. On the contrary, their terms in the war zone have frequently been extended by months. Many soldiers, sent to war on the basis of lies in the first place, have been killed in attacks that took place after their scheduled time to return home to their families.



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