

Tom Ridge's Homeland Silences

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Body

Tom Ridge, head of the Office of Homeland Security, is in the news a lot. This month, he was in Mexico to negotiate a new border agreement. The other day he was unveiling a new color-coded warning system on threats to public safety. He holds news conferences about the administration's plans to defend the nation against terrorism. But one place Mr. Ridge has not appeared is before the Congressional committees that oversee and finance homeland security operations. At the White House's request, Mr. Ridge is refusing to answer Congressional questions in public. That is beyond puzzling, and the Bush administration should unmuzzle him immediately.

Last week the furor over the Immigration and Naturalization Service's visa approvals for two terrorist hijackers underscored how much work needs to be done in the domestic security area. Congress has many of the same questions the rest of the nation has about how that could happen and what can be done to keep it from happening again.

The administration asserts that any questions by Congress should properly be answered by the various agencies involved, like the I.N.S. That is no doubt true. But the \$38 billion the administration proposes to spend next year on such security would be spread across more than 80 departments and agencies, according to the Senate appropriations staff. Mr. Ridge is the one who decided how much should go to immigration services, as opposed to border patrols or anti-bioterrorism efforts. Only he can explain the rationale behind those priorities.

The White House says Mr. Ridge is simply a presidential adviser, like Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, and that it would be a violation of executive privilege to have him testify. But this argument makes no sense, given the fact that Mr. Ridge has been constantly in communication with Congress behind the scenes. When lawmakers wanted to spend more money on homeland defenses than the administration recommended last year, it was Mr. Ridge who wrote to House and Senate leaders to say that spending was sufficient.

For many Democrats, Mr. Ridge's refusal to appear before Congress is part of a continuing administration effort to keep Congress from prying into its affairs, an effort that includes Vice President Dick Cheney's refusal to turn over the names of people consulted by his energy task force. But this is not a partisan issue. Many Republicans are also asking Mr. Ridge, the former Pennsylvania governor, to appear. But Representative C. W. Young, the Florida Republican who leads the House Appropriations Committee, has said it is enough for Mr. Ridge to meet privately with House members. That would be fine if Congress were a private club.

Mr. Ridge will need all the good will he can get from Congress as he tackles the great political swamp of government reorganization. News reports suggest that he is having some trouble persuading various agencies to hand over their border operations to a new unified department, combining customs, immigration and other services, that is to be proposed later this year. States and localities are going to be squabbling about which ones should get special law enforcement aid. All these interests have their own defenders on Capitol Hill, and Mr. Ridge would do well to cultivate Congressional support every chance he has.

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On homeland defense, all Americans are on the same page, eager to work together. Even the least sophisticated Washington observer knows that Congressional hearings are usually conducted more for the television cameras than to get new information. But in Mr. Ridge's case, those goals mesh. He is the public face of our domestic security effort, and he should welcome any chance to share the administration's thinking with the nation.

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