

Frontlines

OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND AND OUT OF THE LOOP

by David Silverberg
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Since its inception, we at *HSToday* have very consciously made an effort not to simply be a Washington, DC publication, confining our coverage to developments "inside the Beltway," as the phrase goes.

But this letter is very much an inside the Beltway missive and it has to do with the future physical location of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

A little over a year ago, DHS announced that it would be consolidating its headquarters in a new building on the grounds of the former St. Elizabeth's mental hospital in southeast Washington. As Kelley Vlahos, our newest Washington correspondent, reports in this month's Nebraska Ave. column-the column that covers doings inside DHS and is named after the location of the department's current headquarters-the department leadership, the mayor of the District of Columbia and the administration all see this as an ideal way to **consolidate the department's 22 different agencies into a common culture and have a single, massive, secure headquarters on the order of the Pentagon**. Opposition to the plan has largely come from historic preservationists and Congress, which has refused to appropriate money for the move.

Downsides

Read Hellman's Wash Bsns Jnl ltr to editor and the GMU paper referenced on page 2.

We're coming late to this debate but since nothing has moved so far, there's still time for comment and we have to say, moving DHS to a hilltop in Anacostia distant from the national political core seems like a pretty bad idea.

First, let's not even start to discuss the incongruity (or-some would argue-the appropriateness) of putting DHS on the grounds of a former insane asylum. Whatever money was appropriated for the task would really go to subsidize the humor of late-night comics who would be given a mountain of material for every shortcoming of DHS or the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). It's already bad enough that DHS and FEMA are the butts of jokes. Let's not add the fact that they would be headquartered on the spot where the lobotomy was invented.

Next there is the questionable wisdom of putting a massive building intended to be the headquarters of the fight against terrorism on a hilltop. **In the Navy there's a saying that ships come in two types-submarines and targets**. The same could be said of buildings and a DHS fortress atop a hill would be an overwhelmingly tempting target for all sorts of mischief.

One of the reasons that the District of Columbia's Mayor Adrian Fenty (D) likes the idea is that he believes it would bring development and economic activity to Anacostia, which is a distressed neighborhood-or put another way, an awful, dangerous slum. Anacostia is in the process of being redeveloped, with a new stadium and grand plans for a new waterfront with commercial and residential attractions. DHS at St. Elizabeth's would fit into this commendable vision. But until that entire redevelopment takes place, **DHS would be a walled enclave entirely separate from the neighborhood around it-and would probably remain so after it was finished**.

Right now DHS employee morale is the lowest in the federal government by several measures. Dragging thousands of federal employees to the distant edge of the District will indeed create a common DHS culture-one of resentment, depression and frustration. **DHS will successfully create a morale level below rock bottom**.

To me, one of the worst effects of siting DHS at St. Elizabeth's will be to remove it from the **center of political and administrative activity that now takes place in the area of the White House, Capitol, State Department** and, to a lesser extent, the Pentagon. This physical proximity has a political impact-as for, example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation knew when it built its glowering Ministry of Love on Pennsylvania Ave.

As an essential new function of government, **homeland security should have a physical presence in the decisionmaking corridor.** But DHS was always an afterthought for this administration, which created it to get ahead of Democratic moves to impose a homeland security department. Putting DHS in Anacostia seems like an expression of contempt in steel and concrete. Lawmakers and high administration officials will not be making pilgrimages to St. Elizabeth's. **DHS will be out of sight, out of mind and out of the loop.**

Alternatives

So what are the alternatives?

One would be to raze the department's current Nebraska Ave. complex and build something completely new there. This would keep DHS near the political core and might be less expensive than a completely new facility in Anacostia.

Another alternative was offered in the "Frontlines" section of our February edition by NJ Slabbert, who advocated a dispersed department linked by fiber optic cable with a small front office in the political core. While "Frontlines" is an open forum and we don't always endorse the views expressed there, **this has merit.** It would keep DHS robust and functioning in the event of a disaster or attack.

Whatever solution is selected, homeland security is now a critical function of government. Any physical headquarters should have proximity to top decisionmakers and Congress. After all, these are the people-along with all Americans-that DHS is pledged to protect. **HST**

David Silverberg, Editor, is a respected Washington writer and editor with experience in defense, technology and congressional affairs.

Please read the short white paper by GMU George Mason University Prof. Mark Addleson — (it is on the bio page of my website) entitled:

[Remaking the DHS GMU Prof Addleson HQ strategy](#)

Remaking the DHS

*Proposal for a DHS Strategically Symbolic HQ and Visitor Center in Downtown, DC
The historic Old Post Office Building at 1100 Pennsylvania Avenue*