



# Redefining Homeland Security

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**Abstract.** Definitions are important, especially in the U.S. federal government. They are the basis of laws that justify budgets, fund programs and determine capabilities. However, definitions are notoriously difficult to cast because they must contend with exceptions and changing circumstances. This is the case with the U.S. definition of homeland security.

Despite its importance, the definition of homeland security has languished for years. The definition posted on the U.S. Department of Homeland Security website is a throwback to the original 2002 definition and apparently ignores the lessons of history that demonstrate it is deficient. In 2007, the U.S. Congress passed a law mandating a Quadrennial Homeland Security Review to prevent future lapses in homeland security. However, the definition that emerged from the first review in 2010 persists. Although it improves on the original 2002 definition, it does not adequately consider new and resurgent threats that face the nation.

This chapter examines various definitions of homeland security, discusses why they are inadequate and proposes a new definition that is accurate and concise. A good definition is important to help shape the U.S. Department of Homeland Security mission, set priorities, justify budgets and ensure that programs are successful.

**Keywords:** Homeland Security · Definition · Non-State Actors · Terrorism · Weapons of Mass Destruction

## 1 Introduction

The International Federation for Information Processing (IFIP) is a leading multinational, non-governmental organization in the information and communications science and technology domains. So why should members of an IFIP Technical Committee focused on security and privacy protection in information processing systems care about homeland security? The answer is simple. Cyber security is an essential component of critical infrastructure protection, which is essential to homeland security, which is about safeguarding a nation from domestic catastrophic destruction. Homeland security is a priority to all nations. Yet for something so important, the concept of homeland security is often misunderstood in the United States, resulting in confusion and disruptions that have undermined and detracted from the homeland security mission. The root of the problem, at least in the United States, lies with those entrusted with managing

homeland security. Indeed, for many reasons, over more than 20 years, they have failed to cast an accurate and concise definition of homeland security.

Definitions are useful tools that help distinguish, separate and bound concepts. In a governmental context their importance cannot be underestimated because they underpin missions, funding and capabilities. But definitions are also notoriously difficult to cast. Within a universe of infinite possibilities, exceptions are a certainty. Definitions are also subject to change over time due to evolving language and impinging circumstances. The definition of homeland security is no different. The concept is seemingly too complex to capture and previous attempts have proved insufficient to cope with the scope and scale of the unprecedented events encountered in recent U.S. history. This may be why the official U.S. definition of homeland security has languished since it was last updated in 2010. Certainly, the world situation has not languished during this time. Now, as the United States faces a new array of unprecedented threats it is appropriate to revisit the definition of homeland security.

## 2 Motivation

On June 12, 2016, a shooter entered the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, killing 49 people and wounding 53 more. It was the deadliest mass shooting in the United States at the time. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) deemed it a terrorist attack because the shooter mentioned that it was intended to stop U.S. bombing in Syria and Iraq.

On October 1, 2017, a shooter on the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino fired more than 1,000 rounds into a concert crowd on the Las Vegas strip, killing 60 people and wounding at least 413. The motive for the attack has not been determined and it remains the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history [1].

The Orlando and Las Vegas shootings epitomize an unfortunate trend in domestic mass killings. They have conveyed perceptions among the general public that every mass shooting is a terrorist incident and every terrorist incident is a homeland security incident. Neither perception is correct, but members of the public can hardly be blamed for their confusion.

Immediately after the Orlando shooting, Secretary Jeh Johnson of the U.S. Department Homeland Security (DHS) said his agency was “dedicated to investigating the tragedy, along with the [Federal Bureau of Investigation] and [its] state and local partners, and supporting the Orlando community in the tragedy’s aftermath” [6]. After the Las Vegas incident, Acting Secretary Elaine Duke announced that the agency was “closely monitoring the situation and working with [its] federal, state and local partners in responding to and investigating [the] tragedy” [14].

Although the statements made by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security leaders expressed the sincere desire of public officials to do everything in their power in the wake of the national tragedies, the fact of the matter is that the incidents fell outside the Department’s mission and charter. Indeed, the U.S.

Department of Homeland Security had no investigative authority or capability to intercede in what were fundamentally local law enforcement matters [25]. Despite their good intentions, the statements by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security leadership may have made matters worse by blurring jurisdictional boundaries and putting other agencies on the defensive. Indeed, one might contend that the overall homeland security efforts were negatively impacted, if not placed in jeopardy. Fixing the problem requires an accurate and concise definition of homeland security.

### 3 Searching for Hidden Meaning

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security website ([www.dhs.gov](http://www.dhs.gov)) would appear to be the right place to look up the definition of homeland security. However, the definition is difficult to find. One has to conduct a site search that points to Instruction Manual 262-12-001-01, DHS Lexicon (2017 edition, revision 2.1) [23]. After downloading the PDF file and scrolling down to page 301, the following definition of homeland security is encountered:

“... a concerted national effort to prevent terrorist attacks within the United States, reduce America’s vulnerability to terrorism, and minimize the damage and recover from attacks that do occur.”

In the same instruction manual, the definition is extended as follows:

“... includes actions to prepare for, protect against, prevent, respond to, and recover from all threats or acts of terrorism.”

And finally, the definition is annotated as follows:

“While the Department of Homeland Security is the lead federal agency for mitigating vulnerabilities, threats and incidents related to terrorism, its responsibilities also include: preparing for, responding to, and recovering from natural disasters; stemming illegal drug flows; thwarting fraudulent immigration; strengthening border security; promoting the free flow of commerce; and maintaining civil rights.”

This definition of homeland security is interesting. First, it appears to regress to the original definition and overlook the historical reasons for subsequent changes to the definition. Second, the dissembling additions acknowledge the inadequacy of the current definition and lend credence to the difficulty of casting the definition. Third, the definition, which is buried deep in the U.S. Department of Homeland Security website, lends weak support to the Department’s mission statement [24] that prominently extols:

“With honor and integrity, we will safeguard the American people, our homeland, and our values.”

This raises the question of safeguarding Americans from what? Terrorism?

Not exactly. Title 18, Sect. 2331 of the United States Code defines “terrorism” as a violent act designed to coerce the U.S. government. Terrorism has been a U.S. concern since the 19th century, but homeland security did not enter the jargon until the 21st century. What changed to bring homeland security to the forefront of U.S. security concerns?

## 4 Terrorism

The 1995 Tokyo Subway attacks brought homeland security to the fore. On March 20, 1995, five members of AUM Shinrikyo entered Tokyo Subway stations and punctured bags filled with liquid Sarin inside passenger cars packed with office workers on their morning commute. Twelve people were killed and 5,500 sought medical attention. Experts say it could have been much worse. Sarin is a chemical nerve agent so deadly that a single drop can kill a grown man [13].

This was deemed a terrorist attack because the leader of AUM Shinrikyo intended it would bring down the Japanese government. But what made it unique was that it was the first deployment of a weapon of mass destruction by a non-state actor. At the time, only nation states were thought to have the technical resources needed to manufacture weapons of mass destruction. AUM Shinrikyo proved this notion wrong. Also, it positioned homeland security between national security and law enforcement in order to deal the potential use of weapons of mass destruction by non-state actors.

In the United States, weapons of mass destruction was a national security concern and non-state actors was a law enforcement concern. Strict separation was maintained between the two to protect the rights of citizens. As a result of the Tokyo Subway attacks, in June 1995, President Clinton signed Presidential Decision Direction #39 (PDD-39) [18], creating a framework for U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies to coordinate to prevent similar weapons of mass destruction attacks in the United States.

Unfortunately, this did not work, as the events of Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001 demonstrated to worldwide horror. Nineteen men hijacked four aircraft and flew three of them into the Twin Towers in New York City, and the Pentagon outside Washington, DC. Learning of their impending fate from cell phone conversations with friends and family, passengers aboard the fourth jet attempted to seize control of the plane until the hijackers flew it into the ground outside Shanksville, Pennsylvania. The 9/11 attacks killed 2,996 people (including the hijackers) and caused up to \$50 billion in direct damage, including the total destruction of the iconic Twin Towers [4].

Passenger manifests revealed that the hijackers were members of al-Qaeda operating in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda staged the 9/11 attacks to coerce the U.S. to remove its forces stationed in Saudi Arabia. By definition, the 9/11 attacks were collectively an act of terrorism, but this is not what made it unique. According to the investigative National Commission [12], the 9/11 attacks were unique due to their surprising disproportionality. Nineteen hijackers inflicted as much damage

as the Japanese Imperial Fleet did to Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The hijackers did not use weapons of mass destruction. Instead, they created weapons of mass destruction effects by turning passenger jets into guided missiles [12].

Following the 9/11 attacks, weapons of mass destruction attacks by non-state actors became shorthand for terrorism. Faced with a problem perched between national security and law enforcement, President Bush decided to create a new agency devoted to homeland security.

The 9/11 attacks brought homeland security to the forefront of U.S. security concerns and shaped the very definition of the concept. The 2002 National Strategy for Homeland Security [19] highlights the following definition in a striking blue box:

“Homeland Security is a concerted national effort to prevent terrorist attacks within the United States, reduce America’s vulnerability to terrorism, and minimize the damage and recover from attacks that do occur.”

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 that established the U.S. Department of Homeland Security was greatly influenced by this definition. The largest U.S. government reorganization since the National Security Act of 1947 began with a new definition that arose from an unprecedented threat. Indeed, the National Security Act of 1947 that reorganized U.S government after World War II was itself precipitated by the failures leading up to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and an attempt to prevent surprise attacks potentially using atomic weapons.

The 2002 government reorganization was perfectly logical, except that the underlying definition was flawed. The concept of homeland security did not consider an important non-state actor that is more than capable of creating weapons of mass destruction effects – Mother Nature.

## 5 Natural Disasters

The tropical depression that became Hurricane Katrina formed over the Bahamas on August 23, 2005. It became a Category 5 storm with winds in excess of 157 mph after it crossed Florida and entered the Gulf of Mexico on August 26. It churned along the Gulf Coast causing destruction across Florida, Alabama and Mississippi before striking New Orleans on August 29. Although the city was heavily battered, it withstood the brunt of the 125 mph winds from the downgraded Category 3 storm. But the 8 to 10 in. of rain and the 14-foot storm surge overwhelmed the city’s levees and drainage canals. The Mississippi River Gulf Outlet breached its levees at 20 locations and the federally-built levee system protecting downtown New Orleans was breached at 53 locations. By August 31, 80% of New Orleans was flooded, some parts with 15 feet of water. Hurricane Katrina resulted in 1,392 fatalities, many of them considered preventable [20].

Government entities at all levels failed to plan and prepare for and aggressively respond to Hurricane Katrina. However, the primary blame fell on the U.S.

Department of Homeland Security. In 1979, President Carter issued Executive Order 12148 that created the Federal Emergency Management Agency to coordinate federal efforts and assist state and local governments in protecting citizens from natural disasters. In 2003, the Federal Emergency Management Agency was moved into the new U.S. Department of Homeland Security under the premise, proven during 9/11, that the same first responders who deployed during natural disasters would also be needed following weapons of mass destruction attacks. However, after the disastrous hurricane response, the U.S. Congress felt that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's focus on terrorism had detracted from its emergency management responsibilities [20].

After the Hurricane Katrina failures, a revised National Strategy for Homeland Security was released in 2007 that expanded the homeland security mission beyond terrorism by stressing the importance of preventing, protecting, responding and recovering from catastrophic events stemming from all hazards [8]. It did not go unnoticed that the United States had twice been caught unprepared by unprecedented new threats in less than a decade. Accordingly, when the U.S. Congress passed the Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007, it included provisions for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to conduct a comprehensive examination of its mission and organization every four years starting in 2009. The first Quadrennial Homeland Security Review was released in 2010. The 2010 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review [22] redefined homeland security as follows:

“Homeland Security is a concerted national effort to ensure a homeland that is safe, secure and resilient against terrorism and other hazards where American interests, aspirations and way of life can thrive.”

Again, the DHS Lexicon [23] is not particularly helpful with the word “hazard,” only mentioning that it is a “source or cause of harm or difficulty.” Hazard alludes to a natural disaster given its inclusion following Hurricane Katrina, although the extended definition says hazards “may be natural, technological or human-caused.” Nevertheless, the current definition of homeland security found on the U.S. Department of Homeland Security website focuses exclusively on terrorism. It makes no mention of other hazards, natural or human-initiated. Indeed, the current definition is a recapitulation of the very first definition of homeland security and is flawed for all the same reasons as the first definition.

## 6 Words Matter

Perhaps the current definition of homeland security is an oversight. After all, it is highly unlikely that U.S. Department of Homeland Security leadership pored over the 746-page lexicon to validate its contents, although they should not be expected to do so. However, the leadership is expected to maintain a viable definition of homeland security and ensure that it is prominently exhibited and widely known. This is because words matter, especially in the U.S. federal government.

Consider, for example, the definition of “mass killing.” Title 28, Sect. 530C of the United States Code defines a mass killing as an incident in which three or more people are killed. In 2013, the Federal Bureau of Investigation sought to set this definition in U.S. law to establish a threshold for lending assistance when requested by state and local law enforcement [21]. The threshold had to be codified into law because the Federal Bureau of Investigation is funded by the U.S. Congress. In fact, all federal agencies are funded by congressional appropriations enacted as laws and restrictions on the appropriations are also stipulated in laws. The funding amounts and restrictions on appropriations play a large role in determining agency priorities and programs, that in turn, determine boundaries and capabilities [16]. Accordingly, definitions are very important.

Assume, with good reason, that the definition in the 2010 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review is the official U.S. definition of homeland security. Given the historical insights, this definition is more comprehensive than the one in the lexicon because it addresses terrorism and other hazards. But is the definition complete? The remarks by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security leadership following the Orlando and Las Vegas shootings would indicate that the definition is incomplete.

## 7 Scale and Scope Matter

As horrific as they were, the Orlando and Las Vegas killings were not of the same scale as the 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina, the two homeland security benchmarks. Missing from the official definition of homeland security is a sense of scale that delineates the boundary between homeland security incidents and other incidents. Perhaps what is needed is some form of the word “catastrophe.”

It was understood at the outset that scale matters. President Bush’s 2002 proposal for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security [5] made the distinction very clear by stating: “This would create a single office whose primary mission is the critical task of protecting the United States from catastrophic terrorism.” Somehow the word “catastrophic” got lost along the way.

The term catastrophic needs to be included in the homeland security definition. It would be significant in distinguishing homeland security incidents from other criminal acts. The addition would clarify U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s jurisdictional boundaries, which affect organizational planning and preparation, and shape budget priorities that are ultimately established by law. It would also inform public expectations so that the U.S. Department of Homeland Security would not have to make pretensions that lead to confusion.

Establishing a scale threshold is an improvement, but the notion of scope is also needed in the homeland security definition. A problem with the 2010 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review is its focus on terrorism and hazards. Terrorism covers intentional acts whose motive is to coerce the U.S. government whereas hazards are unintentional acts of nature and accidents. Are there no other acts, intentional or unintentional, that could result in domestic catastrophic destruction? Is the U.S. Department of Homeland Security making the same mistake it made before Hurricane Katrina?

The 2010 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review that created the current homeland security definition also identified the emerging threat from cyber attacks. In fact, cyber attacks had previously been identified as a potential catastrophic threat in a 1997 report by the President’s Commission on Critical Infrastructure Protection after the 1995 Tokyo Subway attacks [15]. Specifically, the report noted that large-scale integration of computer controls in critical infrastructure assets might one day make them vulnerable to cyber attacks. This was prescient because back in 1997 the Internet had no more than 70 million users worldwide (1.7% of the global population), was just entering into commercial use and cyber attacks were relatively unknown.

By 2010, the Internet had grown to two billion users (28.7% of the global population) and three major cyber attacks had given security officials cause for concern. In 2007, government, bank and media websites across Estonia were shut down in what is considered to be the first act of cyber warfare [11]. In 2008, malicious code in a thumb drive breached Pentagon security and infiltrated classified and unclassified U.S. military networks [2]. In 2010, word got out that the Stuxnet virus breached a high-security uranium processing facility in Iran and successfully targeted Siemens industrial control systems that operated uranium hexafluoride centrifuges [10].

Cyber attacks on critical infrastructure assets are a clear and present danger. Project Aurora, a joint experiment conducted in 2007 by the U.S. Departments of Homeland Security and Energy demonstrated the ability to physically destroy a baseline electrical generator by remotely hacking into its controls [26]. The possibility became real in December 2015 when a cyber attack knocked out power in Ukraine’s capital Kiev [7]. In 2018, the cyber threat struck closer to home when the U.S. Department of Homeland Security issued an alert about Russian infiltration into the U.S. power grid [17]. The consequences of shutting down power would be worse than any hurricane or earthquake because the damage would be nationwide and long term – it could be the worst disaster since the Civil War. Other cyber attack scenarios with disastrous consequences include undermining the Federal Reserve and causing a nuclear reactor meltdown.

Massive cyber attacks are not included the current definition of homeland security. Should they be incorporated in a new definition along with terrorism and hazards?

## 8 Effects Not Threats

Extending the definition of homeland security to include every possible threat is a futile pursuit. For example, if cyber attacks are added, should civil defense also be incorporated?

Civil defense protects the domestic population from enemy attacks. The Civil Defense Act of 1950 was enacted to protect U.S. citizens from the growing threat of nuclear attacks by the Soviet Union. The act created the Federal Civil Defense Administration tasked with assisting state and local governments with developing plans and preparing measures to deal with the unthinkable. Remaining



secluded in a fallout shelter for weeks on end only to emerge to unimaginable devastation was deemed the best way to survive a nuclear attack. The idea was so abhorrent that public support quickly evaporated and U.S. Congress never approved funding for a massive sheltering program.

In 1991, the world breathed a collective sigh of relief when the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended, taking with it the threat of nuclear annihilation. The Civil Defense Act of 1950 was repealed in 1994, but not before its authorities were transferred to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The transferred authorities appear to have been forgotten until Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022 [9]. At the outset, Russia outmatched Ukraine in every measure of military might and was heavily favored to overrun its neighbor in a matter of weeks. In a classic David versus Goliath encounter, Ukraine bested its larger opponent with better morale, experience and weapons supplied by Western powers. Russian forces attacking on three fronts were halted in their tracks and in some places turned back. Angered by Ukraine's stunning successes, Vladimir Putin threatened to defend Russia with a nuclear attack against the United States. It was the first time in 30 years that the world felt a shiver from the Cold War. The Federal Emergency Management Agency went to the bookshelf and began dusting off its civil defense plans [3].

Civil defense is most certainly a homeland security concern. The results would be catastrophic if Russia were to attack the U.S. homeland with electromagnetic pulse, cyber or nuclear weapons. But how can a homeland security definition be casted that covers terrorism, hazards, cyber attacks and civil defense, along with every other potential threat? The answer is that it is not necessary.

This is because it is effects not threats that concern homeland security. Although homeland security began with the deployment of weapons of mass destruction in the 1995 Tokyo Subway attacks, it was the weapons of mass destruction effects created by subverting the nation's transportation infrastructure that brought homeland security to the forefront of U.S. policy concerns after the 9/11 attacks. Terrorist acts are certainly a homeland security concern. But Hurricane Katrina that was bereft of motive suggests that motive is not an issue. Indeed, the salient characteristics of a homeland security incident are not cause or motive but scale and location – the effects must be catastrophic and they must occur within U.S. territory.

## 9 Redefining Homeland Security

The proposed definition of homeland security is:

“Safeguarding the United States from domestic catastrophic destruction.”

This definition improves on the 2010 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review definition. It incorporates a qualifying threshold for what constitutes a homeland security incident. It is inclusive of all potential threats that could cause domestic catastrophic destruction without attempting to enumerate them. The definition explicitly states that homeland security encompasses actions to “safeguard,”

which is a verb, unlike the current definition that only implies actions by using the adjective “safe.” Finally, the proposed definition is more concise, just seven words instead of 32, focusing on the primary concern and making it easier to remember.

In order to qualify as a homeland security incident, the effects must be domestic and catastrophic. It is, of course, necessary to specify what constitutes a catastrophic incident. This requires research, and a threshold such as that for mass killing incidents could be determined later. For now, absent a specific threshold, the 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina could be considered to be benchmarks. As tragic as they were, the Orlando and Las Vegas shootings do not measure up to these benchmarks. Perhaps, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security leadership would not have made their statements after the two incidents if the proposed definition had been in place.

Clearly, any threat that could result in domestic catastrophic destruction is a homeland security concern. The 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina certainly qualify. So would cyber attacks, incidents mitigated by civil defense and many more incidents that are yet to be named or conceived. The proposed definition is inclusive not exclusive.

Absolute security is unattainable. Security is a relative state. Risk is the measure of security. Cost is the determinant for risk. Security, therefore, is a dynamic quantity based on changing risk and cost factors. Safeguard is an appropriate term because it implies no specific end state other than continuing action that balances risk against cost. Mitigating actions are conducted over the four phases of disaster management to prevent, protect, respond and recover from threat agents.

The proposed definition is accurate and concise, which make it understandable and memorizable. Its simplicity can make it a unifying force that could guide every element of a massive organization such as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, as well as the American people, towards a common goal.

## 10 Conclusions

Homeland security is an important concept whose definition must be widely known, or at least easy to discover and comprehend. The proposed definition is accurate, concise, simple and inclusive. The definition is also useful. It can be a unifying theme for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. It can set public expectations. It should help shape the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, enabling it to determine priorities and programs, justify budgets and appropriations, set boundaries and enhance capabilities.

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