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New Office to Become a White House Agency

By ELIZABETH BECKER and TIM WEINER

WASHINGTON, Sept. 27 — The Office of Homeland Security announced by President Bush after the Sept. 11 attacks will be elevated to a new White House agency with powers to match those of the National Security Council, the White House chief of staff said tonight.

The new Homeland Security Council will be run by Gov. Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania. It will include the attorney general, the secretaries of defense, treasury, health and human services and agriculture, as well as the directors of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"If you take a look at what Condi Rice does so effectively, you'll get an idea what Governor Ridge will be doing just as effectively," said the chief of staff, Andrew H. Card Jr., referring to Condoleezza Rice, the president's national security adviser.

The National Security Council was created in 1947 at the dawn of the cold war. It was designed to coordinate national defense, diplomacy and intelligence at the highest levels for the president. Similarly, the new council, which will have 100 staff members, comparable in size to the national security staff, is intended to help coordinate counterterrorism and prevent a repeat of the Sept. 11 attack on the United States.

Defense officials said the administration had also decided to create a military homeland defense command. And the White House's longtime terrorism czar will now concentrate solely on the threat of attacks on computer systems, officials said.

In a speech to a joint meeting of Congress on Sept. 15, President Bush announced that Governor Ridge, a longtime friend and political ally, would run a new White House Office of Homeland Security. But he gave only a broad hint of how that office might work.

Empowered by its proximity to the president rather than actual legal authority, the office is intended to "coordinate activities, to make sure that anybody who wants to harm America will have a hard time doing so," President Bush said today.

Tonight's announcement reflects a desire to give Mr. Ridge, as homeland



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security adviser, the power to coordinate federal agencies at the highest level and to have some authority, as yet undetermined, over their budgets, Mr. Card said.

Members of Congress have praised the homeland security initiative but have voiced concern that Mr. Ridge would lack the power needed to pull together elements of the 46 separate agencies and departments that will be part of the new effort.

President Bush's top advisers heard some concerns in meetings with Congressional leaders. Mr. Card said that when filling out the details of this new council, the president had taken into account that the government had a "good track record on reacting to emergencies."

"But in intelligence gathering, prevention and defense it's been less good," he said.

Mr. Ridge is charged with managing the diverse and sometimes warring agencies that were in charge during period when the Sept. 11 terrorists entered the United States with ease and carried out their plot undetected.

The new council will be paid for with White House money. There will be no Congressional oversight and confirmation by the Senate for Mr. Ridge will not be required.

The various agencies and departments that will report to Governor Ridge could be compared to 46 different and sometimes incompatible computer systems. Their lack of connectivity means there is no national 911 number. Governor Ridge and two other White House officials will be charged with bringing together all the available intelligence and all the services necessary to respond to an emergency or an attack.

"Almost every one of the agencies that has to join the fight here has woefully inadequate business practices to share information," said John J. Hamre, the former deputy secretary of defense. "Invariably they have 35- to 40-year-old reporting requirements that are still paper- bound. Now, in this kind of era, that's just unacceptable."

White House officials have also decided to create a homeland defense command within the military despite years of criticism from civil rights groups that a military assigned to protect the country could easily be transformed into a super police force.

The Joint Forces Command in Norfolk, Va., is one obvious choice, according to defense officials involved in the planning. The command could also be shared with the North American Aerospace Defense Command in Colorado.

With the heightened fear of a bio- chemical attack, Mr. Ridge's office will also include experts in bio-defense from the Department of Health and Human

Service, who have already been notified of their new positions. They will supervise the vaccines and antibiotic stockpiles now managed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, official said.

Counterterrorism would be reorganized under Governor Ridge's office. Richard A. Clarke, counterterrorism czar at the White House for the last 11 years, will be put in charge of the new Office of Cyber Security, according to officials involved in the planning.

Gov. James S. Gilmore III of Virginia, chairman of a federal panel on terrorism, is among several senior officials who question whether billions for counterterrorism are being well spent.

Governor Gilmore said the government was spending \$10.4 billion for the purpose. Of that, he said, about \$800 million goes to readiness and response. And of that, \$300 million goes to states and local governments — "in a crisis, the first responders, as we have seen in both New York and in Virginia," Mr. Gilmore said.

Mr. Card said that "the first responders are very important" and that state and local governments would be represented in some form on the Homeland Security Council.

Since May 1998, under secret directives issued by the Clinton White House, Mr. Clarke has been in charge of coordinating counterterrorism plans, defending against computer attacks, protecting civilians against biological attacks and stockpiling vaccines.

Although the government made progress in the cyberwar field, aided by billions of dollars invested in solving the Year 2000 computer problem, all involved say that efforts to harmonize the federal, state and local responses of terrorist threats have often been discordant.

Mr. Clarke, like Mr. Ridge, on paper had the power to cut through bureaucratic walls and break down jurisdictional boxes. But the task was difficult. In a 1999 interview, he said: "There is a problem convincing people that there is a threat. There is disbelief and resistance. Most people don't understand."