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**Civics 101**

**Episode 88: Department of Homeland Security**

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:00] After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, America felt new threats, had new enemies, and declared itself leader of the global war on terror.

[00:00:38] The federal government created the Department of Homeland Security, incorporating existing agencies and creating new ones, to help secure the nation from threats and attacks. Helping us to understand Homeland Security today is Ron Nixon. He's the New York Times homeland security correspondent. And Ron thank you so much for joining us.

**Ron Nixon:** [00:00:56] Thank you for having me.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:57] So the current Department of Homeland Security is huge and in charge of a lot of different agencies. So let's start with the big picture. What is its goal?

**Ron Nixon:** [00:01:07] The overall goal of the Department of Homeland Security from its inception is to protect America from a terrorist attack. That is the overarching goal, then there are others beneath that. But that is the first thing that is listed in the act that create the department.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:25] That is a huge mandate. So can you give us a rundown of some of the biggest agencies within the department and what they do?

**Ron Nixon:** [00:01:31] Yes the biggest one is Customs and Border Protection which is a mishmash of various agencies that came together to create this one. They took pieces of the old customs agency, they took the Border Patrol they took pieces of INS they took pieces of the Department of Agriculture and created Customs and Border Protection which has about 60000 people. That's the biggest agency within that. Also there is ICE which is Immigration and Customs Enforcement. So those are two of the biggest and also two that most Americans are most familiar with. There's also the Coast Guard which basically came over as is there's a Secret Service that came over as is. So it took a lot of agencies that existed before like FEMA which is also part of the Department of Homeland Security. Put them in and they created these other agencies out of existing agencies.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:02:36] So some of these agencies used to report to the Justice Department, Treasury, Defense, Health and Human Services even Agriculture. It's a huge bureaucracy. I mean how how did they learn to talk to each other for lack of a better term?

**Ron Nixon:** [00:02:51] Well that's an ongoing problem. It's only 15 years old. It's a teenager. So to have some some growing pains in terms of getting all these agencies to communicate with each other as you mentioned you know you got the Coast Guard which is part of Department of Transportation and DOD because it is a military service. So they traditionally didn't talk to the Immigration and Naturalization Services. So all of these agents they came from these different places they had different mandates at the time. The people who were in these agencies you know had a legacy that they knew and they adhered to like the U.S. Customs Service. So bringing all these people together, it's a little problematic and they had to do it really fast as well.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:43] So people who traveled before September 11th 2001 remember you know going to an airport you just basically checked in and showed your license if you had it. What has changed under DHS?

**Ron Nixon:** [00:03:56] I think one of the big things in terms of air travel is the creation of Transportation Security Administration or TSA. TSA was originally created as part of the Department of Transportation and it came over into the Department of Homeland Security so that's a change where you go through the security that you really didn't see before as you mentioned. You know I know I used to be able to go to the gate with my mom and hang out until she flew away. And you know you could you could do that. Now you can't. So that's one of the biggest changes.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:33] I understand there were about 12 people on the transportation watch list on September the 10th 2001.

**Ron Nixon:** [00:04:40] Yes somewhere around there and now you know there are unknown numbers of people on the watch list. And that's one of the other things too that that is really changed, there's something within Customs and Border Protection called the National Targeting Center. And you know when you're coming from abroad and you book a ticket that information immediately they have access to it. So they are running your name against watch lists and intelligence databases and criminal databases so they know a lot about you before you even get on the plane. And another program is called The immigration advisory program which they are plainclothes CBP officers in other countries. They advise the carriers on whether or not to let you board. And so you know if something gets flagged in your record they will simply make a recommendation to the carrier not to board you.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:39] So we're talking about air travel. There are now fortified cockpits there are armed air marshals. But how about in protecting other parts of the nation's borders? Biological attacks, ports?

**Ron Nixon:** [00:05:52] So one of the things that they have now is this container security initiative where they will inspect cargo before it actually gets to the U.S. and then the Coast Guard also has like these port security teams that go and look at the ports and make sure that there's nothing funny going on. They screen the crews of these ships that come in now so it's really huge security apparatus that existed in pieces before but it wasn't as organized and it wasn't under the umbrella of one agency.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:06:33] Let's get to what you described as one of the most important jobs: border security. So what are some examples of things DHS does on a day to day basis to keep threats from crossing the border?

**Ron Nixon:** [00:06:44] Well the most visible thing is probably the Border Patrol which has about 19000 Border Patrol agents on the border who their primary job is to stop terrorists from coming into the country. Of course they apprehend those people who cross the border illegally. They also go after drug traffickers. So that's the most visible.

**Ron Nixon:** [00:07:08] You also have customs officers at the ports of entry and you know a lot of people aren't aware that they turn around a lot of people like you know tens of thousands of people who they deem inadmissible at the ports of entry. So you know combined there you have nearly 40000 people physically on the border. You also have customs officers at the airport. The old U.S. Customs Service had these people here before but the mission has changed somewhat and is more of a national security role. So you know then you have the Coast Guard. You know most people tend to think of the Coast Guard as the rescue people when you're a lost boater out somewhere. But the Coast Guard actually has a huge role in border security because they stop threats thousands of miles away before they actually get to the U.S. so they will target drug smugglers thousands of miles away off the coast of South America before they even get to the border. They also target migrants who are trying to get to the U.S. on boats.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:26] Well Ron you recently wrote in The New York Times detailing how the DHS has expanded its role in foreign countries, and some other countries aren't pleased about this, but how else could its various agencies prevent people from coming to the U.S. other than acting in other countries?

**Ron Nixon:** [00:08:43] Well that's primarily the reason that they are there is to target the threats as close to the source as possible. I mean in some ways it's similar to the military. You know the military always has this motto it's better to fight them over there than here. And that's similar to the way that DHS looks at it is that if we didn't stop a terrorist from getting on a plane in Europe then that makes us safer here. If we can stop a narco-sub you know one of these semi submersible submarines that the drug cartels use that can store up to five tons of cocaine. If we can stop that off the coast of South America rather than trying to stop it as is broken down into kilos at the border then that's a good thing. You know in terms of a public health perspective that makes us safer as well because of drugs don't get in. So while there is some opposition in some of these countries that's simply the way that you are able to target these threats abroad.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:49] Well as we're getting more and more years between September 11th and today, the DHS has been operating for some time. Is it drugs that they're looking at or terrorism? Has the focus shifted?

**Ron Nixon:** [00:10:02] They're looking at all of it. In the act that created the Department of Homeland Security and basically gave it the focus of terrorism. It's contradictory in a way because the FBI is considered the lead agency or is the lead agency on counterterrorism in the U.S. So you know it's like who's supposed to take the lead there. Well the FBI and what's the role of the DHS I think that that's something that's still kind of being figured out and so they take more of a civil law enforcement role in targeting these networks of drug smugglers or human smugglers or human traffickers. You know they have stopped terrorists from entering the country so they still have that role. But mostly what they do is focused on going after these drug trafficking organizations and these human smuggling human trafficking organizations and trying to disrupt them as close to the source as they can.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:11:06] Some of the most significant threats today to the U.S. are the small agile extremist groups and the so-called loners. But DHS is enormous, it's slow to change. So how well has the department adapted to these new challenges?

**Ron Nixon:** [00:11:22] Well I think they're adapting like everyone else which is slowly because the threats are more homegrown. A lot of the people who are radicalized are radicalized here in the U.S. And so the way that you know the U.S. is typically thought about terrorism is terrorism from abroad and people trying to get here you know more along the lines of the 9/11 types or attacks or the 1993 World Trade Center bombing those kinds of threats.

[00:11:53] But when the threat is here in the U.S. and these are like homegrown threats how do you deal with that? I think they are making an effort to deal with it in terms of something that was started under the Obama administration caleld countering violent extremism and going into communities and trying to work with them to identify people who may be radicalized.

[00:12:18] Now of course there's some controversy around that particular program because a lot of the Muslim communities feel like they are being specifically targeted, even though the bigger threat appears to be coming from white supremacist groups.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:32] There has been criticism for the Department of Homeland Security on a number of different levels for waste and lack of oversight, lack of transparency, low morale. Can you give us an update on how this huge bureaucracy is doing to meet those challenges?

**Ron Nixon:** [00:12:47] Well I think in terms of morale this something that started under the last administration under Secretary Jeh Johnson former secretary now J. Johnson was doing something called unity of effort, which is he wanted these organizations to work together and to think of themselves as Department of Homeland Security because you know again as you bring in these 22 different agencies into one agency they're still thinking of themselves as Legacy Customs and Legacy INS.

[00:13:20] So he created these task forces. So one of the Task Force Joint Task Force West has a border patrol officer as the head of it and his deputies are an ICE employee and a Coast Guard employee. So this forces them to work together to go after these drug smugglers human trafficking terrorists instead of doing it apart, with ICE doing its thing, CBP doing its thing, and the Coast Guard is doing its thing. That forced them to work together so that it was this this unity of efforts so to speak and in some ways that's helped with morale because people have a greater sense of where they fit within the agency. So that's one thing that's being done in terms of oversight.

[00:14:10] There have been some some issues in terms of you know TSA has had a number of issues with whistleblowers. There was a whistleblower in my hometown of Minneapolis who reported problems with PreCheck the program that you know you can sign up, they screen you take your fingerprints and all that and you can go expedited trip through the security line. Well she reported problems with it and they were letting people through the security lines that didn't have precheck.

[00:14:41] There's been a number of cases like that probably the most famous one is an air marshal Robert MacLean who told Congress he told MSNBC that they're not putting air marshals on all of these flights and he was fired for you know leaking that information fought to get his job back for ten years. The case went to the Supreme Court and was decided. And now he's back at the agency but says he's still being retaliated against.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:15:13] The Department of Homeland Security was developing and evolving while the U.S. was figuring out how to fight the war on terror. So looking at it now, are we safer 15 years after its formation?

**Ron Nixon:** [00:15:24] It's a hard question to answer but I think overall we are, because now what you have is a more systematic approach to dealing with those terrorist threats whereas before you simply have everybody doing your own thing.

[00:15:41] And because of the creating a unified department that deals with border security that deals with all of these things that keep the U.S. safe is a big step, because other countries have had that forever like the United Kingdom France has the home office.

[00:15:58] I mean they've had something like this forever. So I think those things have made us safer. Now obviously you can't make a 100 percent safe because you know there are things like homegrown threats or threats that you don't know about. You know someone said from Department of Homeland Security you don't know what you don't know. So overall I do think that we're safer.