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On the border with Michael Chertoff

The Homeland Security secretary is the point man for White House efforts to stop illegal immigration. He has an ambitious agenda -- and a stubborn streak to match.

**By Nicole Gaouette
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TUCSON — Michael Chertoff was in the driver's seat of a white Chevrolet Tahoe, under the glare of high-powered lights ringing Border Patrol headquarters. It was 10 p.m., 15 hours into the Homeland Security secretary's workday.

An agent sitting beside him tapped a glowing computer screen. A map expanded.

Drawing on an arsenal of radar, sensors and cameras, it displayed a spray of red dots -- suspected border crossers.

But Chertoff saw that the "virtual fence" had a major flaw: It wasn't able to show in real time where agents were on patrol along the border.

The secretary, leaning back wearily in his seat, said pensively, "We'll work on this."

In the three years since Chertoff took office, his job has been transformed by a bitter debate over illegal immigration that made sealing the border a priority. Once dubbed the nation's "anti-terrorism czar," he is now also its top border agent.

The vehicle-mounted computer is just one piece of Chertoff's efforts to revolutionize the nation's border with Mexico. Besides the installation of high-tech surveillance tools meant to create a virtual fence, he is spearheading the construction of 670 miles of real fence and a rapid expansion of the Border Patrol.

As he pursues the ambitious agenda, the secretary must convince skeptical Americans that it will work. Chertoff -- a graduate of Harvard Law School and a former Supreme Court clerk, federal judge and federal prosecutor -- retains a lawyer's faith in the power of a good argument persuasively delivered.

"I always believed that if I could get direct access to 12 people, I could talk sense into them," he said.

Chertoff thinks he has the grit to get the job done: "I'm really, really stubborn. That and, honestly, I guess we're very conscious of the fact that it's very easy to get bogged down."

This month, making use of the powers given to him by Congress, Chertoff announced that his department would bypass federal laws to speed construction of 370 miles of fence, angering environmentalists and border groups.

"To me, the most important thing we're doing at the border is showing the American people that if we make a judgment that we need to do something and we promise to do it, we'll do it," Chertoff said.

The visit to the Tucson station was Chertoff's third stop on a recent 48-hour, two-state blitz through border country, a trip that vividly illustrated the enormous task ahead as he races toward the end of his tenure.

Yuma, Ariz.

Luis Aguilar's family and colleagues waited for Chertoff in the Border Patrol's sector headquarters. The agent died in January when an alleged drug dealer fleeing to Mexico in a Hummer struck him.

Aguilar's 5-year-old daughter, knobby-kneed in tights and black patent-leather shoes, piped up as Chertoff entered. "Why is everyone clapping?" she asked. "For Daddy?"

The 32-year-old was the first agent to die violently in the line of duty since 1998. As the Border Patrol has put more agents on the front line, violence has increased. Agents were assaulted 987 times in fiscal year 2007 -- with Molotov cocktails, rocks, gunfire, fists and, as in Aguilar's case, vehicles -- a 31% increase from 2006.

"An unfortunate metric," noted Chertoff, who said it indicated smugglers were feeling the heat of more enforcement.

Chertoff wants 18,000 border agents by the end of the year, up from about 15,300, double the number when President Bush took office in 2001. To get those boots on the ground quickly, training has been compressed from five months to at most 95 days.

Border officials are concerned about their ability to offer enough field training. Critics say the accelerated training adds to the danger by leaving agents unprepared.

"It's a recipe for disaster, as well as a guarantee of increased rights violations for those who cross the border, as well as those who call the border home," said Jennifer Allen of the Tucson-based Border Action Network, an immigrant rights group.

In Yuma, Chertoff spoke frankly about the increasing risks of the job and expressed his "personal respect and gratitude." As he did, some agents bit their lips. One silently wept.

"If you try to sugarcoat things . . . they won't have any respect for you," Chertoff said afterward.

San Luis, Ariz.

A convoy swept Chertoff down dusty roads to the San Luis port of entry to observe one of his more controversial decisions. Adopting a recommendation from the Sept. 11 commission, Chertoff limited the type of identification accepted at the border.

In a building that opened to Mexico on one side and the U.S. on the other, Chertoff watched an agent briskly process people entering the U.S.

His decision had drawn "a huge hue and cry from the border" and Capitol Hill, he said.

Chertoff is exasperated that lawmakers demand he improve border controls and then complain that tighter security hampers tourism and trade.

But he relishes a fight, so much so that his staff has a catchphrase for the lethal way he sometimes wields his rhetorical skills: "The snake coming out of the basket."

On this trip, Chertoff was unusually blunt about his conflicts with lawmakers.

" 'We'll implore you to be competent, but as soon as you make changes, we'll attack you,' " he said, recasting their comments. "That's B.S. That puts our guys in a position where they're slapped coming and going, no matter what they do, and to me that's not a valid criticism."

Tucson

Swooping low over emerald fields, a Blackhawk helicopter ferried Chertoff on a bone-jarring ride to Tucson, where a convoy whisked him through the darkness to the sector headquarters.

He was there to check on the \$20.6-million Project 28, named for the 28 miles where Boeing Co. has built a prototype virtual fence to detect border intrusions.

Chertoff is heavily invested in the project, aware that most Americans don't trust the administration to do much about illegal immigration. Winning respect for his agency is a recurring theme for Chertoff, who took over a Homeland Security Department that was the butt of duct-tape jokes in late-night comedy skits.

In Tucson, Chertoff bolted down his second salad of the day, then huddled with operators in a room packed with monitors that displayed camera and radar images.

Soon after, the Government Accountability Office, which conducts investigations for Congress, issued a damaging report about delays and inefficiencies in Project 28. For critics, it was more evidence of the administration's failures.

"The reality is that Project 28 was rushed into implementation to bolster the Bush administration's claim that it was serious about border control," said professor Wayne Cornelius, director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at UC San Diego.

Chertoff acknowledged the system wasn't "as good as it could be," but said the problems would be fixed.

McAllen, Texas

Under a cobalt sky, Chertoff stood near a podium, listening as local officials praised his willingness to work with them. Palm trees swayed in a gentle breeze; Border Patrol agents stood in formation.

Chertoff was in Hidalgo County for a little public diplomacy. Residents and officials had opposed the fence, fearing it would stifle the legal flow of goods and people.

If part of Chertoff's job is to convince Americans that his high-tech system and 670 miles of fence will help stop illegal immigration, he must also convince border communities that the effort will not hurt them.

Chertoff overcame Hidalgo County's objections by endorsing a homegrown suggestion to combine a Rio Grande levee with a barrier. "We're always interested in blending community needs and national security. It's the only antidote to public cynicism," Chertoff told the crowd.

Then he added a caveat: "We always prefer to work cooperatively, but we do have a commitment to secure the border. What I can't afford to do is postpone the inevitable and kick this process down the road."

On the plane back to Washington, where he would soon issue the largest-ever waiver of federal laws to build the border fence, Chertoff explained why he had delivered the warning: "If people think you're going to buckle, you're never going to get anything done."

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