The Reopening

Former DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff on post-COVID Security Challenges

RECORDING DATE
Thursday, August 6, 2020

SPEAKERS
Michael Chertoff
United States Secretary of Homeland Security

HOST
Scott Miller
Senior Adviser, Abshire-Inamori Leadership Academy, CSIS

Andrew Schwartz
Chief Communications Officer, CSIS
Andrew Schwartz: You’re listening to The Reopening. The podcast that asks, "How will America work through the COVID-19 pandemic? How will we innovate, and how will it change our global economy?" Each week we invite top business leaders to share their insights on the road to economic revival here at home, and around the world.

Scott Miller: Today we’re speaking with Michael Chertoff, former secretary of Homeland Security. Michael shares his views on the world post-COVID, including how changed patterns of work may place new demands on cyber security. We also discuss disaster preparedness, election security, and countering disinformation.

Schwartz: I’m Andrew Schwartz.

Miller: And I’m Scott Miller.

Schwartz: And this is The Reopening.

Schwartz: Secretary Michael Chertoff, it is an honor and a pleasure to have you here today with us on our podcast. Thank you so much for being here, sir.

Michael Chertoff: Happy to be here.

Schwartz: So, I want to just dive right into it. Your former agency DHS has important responsibilities as part of the federal response to COVID. You know, coming out of COVID though, we’re going to be a totally different world. How do you see a different world on the horizon? Can you tell us a little bit about that from a government and a business, you’re so close to, you know, the nexus between government and business and the infrastructure and all the things that we’re going to need to be thinking about? Can you give us a sense of your thoughts?

Chertoff: You know, I think that the experience of the virus and frankly, the recognition that even when we get a vaccine people will be understandably concerned about future pandemics. I think we’re going to move to a more online work environment. That doesn’t mean we’re going to do exactly what we’re doing now, but I don’t think we’re going to go back to the days when almost everything was done in an office, face to face. And that means you’re going to be more stress placed on our internet systems, both in terms of usage and availability and also in terms of security. So, I think where the government in particular has a role to play is in making sure we are really building out the infrastructure that we need to connect. Everybody needs to be connected and make sure it’s been done in a way that is secure. And also frankly it respect privacy, because there’ll be some vulnerabilities in that respect as well.

Schwartz: Do you see businesses changing in a major way because of the whole work from home culture or do you think that this is, you know, something that’s more temporary?
Chertoff: I think there will be some significant changes. Now, obviously, to some extent, we’ll return to what we had before, in the sense that people will in fact go to restaurants and local stores and things of that sort. But we may see that some for example of the traditional retail outlets wind up shutting down as we’re seeing even now and they get taken over, either by boutiques, or by these very large enterprises, like an Amazon or Walmart or something of that sort. So, that kind of intermediate retail establishment may be a thing of the past. I think the travel industry will change. I do think that people will resume air travel, but it may not be quite as much business travel as we used to have. Because again, it may be cheaper and more convenient now to use these online platforms as we’re doing right here. And I certainly think the commercial real estate market will change, because I think the inclination to shrink footprints is going to continue, both for economic reasons and for safety reasons.

Schwartz: What does government need to do, though, to help ease these transitions or, you know, foster better interaction between government and business. What does government really need to do?

Chertoff: Well, ideally, I’d like to see government obviously work, for example, in terms of the economic system to smooth transitions, because there will be some bumps. I think among the things that government certainly has to do is work with the private sector to extend broadband and 5G as widely as possible, but also in a secure way. I mean, there is a legitimate concern, which I share, that if you give the Chinese in Huawei, for example, a monopoly you run the risk of giving them a chokehold over the global economy. So, we need to build an industrial policy that creates alternatives. And one thing that I’ve suggested that we combine with our allies and our friends overseas and actually work together to create a market for alternative suppliers of 5G. And finally, I do think that the role of government in terms of cyber Security will continue to be very important as a partnership of the private sector.

Miller: You know all the forecasters agree with you in terms of the changes in work style and the acceleration in technology. About 5% of us worked from home before COVID. About 46% of us are now, along with 22% who aren’t working. So, it’s a problem, but the expectation is when we get whatever normal is or post-COVID, 20% of us will be working from home. So, it’s really a major change and obviously 5G and connectivity and the backbone infrastructure is a vital part of this. Now you helped set up one of the biggest, most influential government agencies, DHS, and created it out of a whole range of agencies, how do you see it responding in this situation and what do you think will be the right way for the government to partner with Homeland Security to it to accomplish what we need?

Chertoff: Well, I think the you know the parts of Homeland Security that deal with cyber security and infrastructure security underneath the agency called CISA are very busy. They’re working first of all with state and local governments try to increase cyber security for the election, or more generally to work with the private sector in terms of upgrading best practices and intelligence about what cyber threats are. And there was recently this Cyber Security
Solarium commission that Congress set up, that’s recommended enhancing the capabilities and resources of CISA to do that. And then I do think the traditional requirements of aviation security, infrastructure security, and border security will remain. There may be added to that in the future, I hope, an element of being able to check or monitor for health problems. You know, if you travel to Singapore over the last few years, they actually have stations where you arrive at the airport to monitor in an ambient way whether you have a fever or if you’ve been from certain parts of the world in terms of travel, they’ll do some more intense screening. We may wind up having to adopt a similar approach to international travel. So those will be enhanced missions for DHS.

Schwartz:

Now, in Singapore and in other countries, they also have national dialogues about misinformation and fake news. But we’re not really having that kind of dialogue, we’re having a food fight about those issues. What do you think is going to happen with cyber security and the nexus between cyber security and misinformation, disinformation, the push to being worked on everybody working online? Are we more or less vulnerable in cyberspace or what are we going to need to do to protect ourselves?

Chertoff:

Well, so let me separate this disinformation issue from the cyber security issue. To me cyber security is dealing with protection against an attack that either affects the confidentiality or the availability or the integrity of your data. So, whether it’s stealing your data or locking it down with ransomware or interfering with industrial control systems, that to me is classic cybersecurity. It is going to continue to be as I think one of the Directors of National Intelligence said a few year ago, General Clapper, it’s going to continue to be an issue where adversaries try to use cyber tools, as a way of conducting maybe sub-military conflict or even military conflict. And unfortunately for Ukrainians, Ukraine has been maybe the test bed for where these tactics are, but we’re going to see it from Iran and increasingly I think from China. So that’s a classic issue of cyber security which we need to continue to invest and upgrade in. And in this regard, I’d say, as we have the proliferation of smart devices, with the internet of things I think that we’re going to need to worry it would increase the surface area for attacks, without putting in standards for security that we should have. So, I think there’s going to be a move to do that. Disinformation is more complicated. And, you know, a lot of it began and has gone on for decades with the Russians and the Chinese what they used to call propaganda or now they call active measures. And it involves propagating, you know, exaggerated or false stories. But to be honest, more and more these days our foreign adversaries don’t need to generate stories because we do it ourselves and all they do is amplify it. And that comes, I think, to what is a subtle but important distinction in how we view disinformation. To the extent we’re worrying about correcting misleading conduct that’s a tricky area, because of the First Amendment and also what one person considers misleading another person doesn’t. So, we have to be careful, and except in very clear cases, we should be very low to involve regulation, based on the fact we don’t believe something. But a separate issue is the amplification issue. The fact that the platforms are involved in using algorithms that attempt to drive engagement by viewers
and users by finding ways to recommend things that kind of drill down or
double down on something that you've expressed an interest in. And that
often can lead to an intensification and almost can be, to be honest, be going
down a rabbit hole. I don't think the algorithms have real First Amendment
value. And it may be that over time we're going to have to actually focus on
reducing the use of algorithms to drive engagement, because that may be
ultimately more pernicious.

Miller: You know I've never thought about that, Michael. But it's really the business
model of news that has changed and the revenue model, because you know
back 25 years ago it was the classified advertising section of the newspaper
that paid for the news people, okay? And so, they're completely news people,
completely disconnected from revenue. What we have now is because so
many people get their news through these platforms and the platforms
benefit when they find items that you like and share as an individual, and
they can track that. That's the algorithm. Per se, you wind up getting not only
just curated news feeds, but more and more selective and these rabbit holes
are very easy to fall into. It's just it now underlies the business model of
news.

Chertoff: And by the way, not just platforms. I mean actually even cable news.

Miller: Yeah. True.

Chertoff: Now on the fragmentation of cable. We moved away from the days when I
was a kid, when you have three networks and they have to appeal to a broad
gauge of viewers. And now, if you have a relatively narrow slice, but they're
intense you get advertising revenue and they can even – and this is kind of
scary - they can even measure remotely whether your eyeballs are focused
on particular kinds of ads and then they use that to up their advertising
prices. So, we are all being manipulated by algorithms and I think in many
ways that's the more concerning and maybe more accessible area to look at
regulating.

Schwartz: Is that something that you're going to continue to bring to the forefront? I
mean, that's not that's not something that's really in the public discussion,
very much.

Chertoff: Yeah, I mean, I've worked on a couple of committees, or commissions, or task
forces that have looked at this. One is sponsored by the Annenberg School at
the University of Pennsylvania. The other is a transatlantic commission on
election integrity, that Anders Rasmussen, the former Secretary General
NATO and I are co-chairing. And, of course I wrote a book called “Exploding
Data,” which actually talked about some of this. Although even in the couple
years since the book came out, it's gotten worse. So maybe I need to do an
updated edition.

Schwartz: Yeah, or maybe an op-ed because I mean these are one of these things where,
you know, we feel like all of Silicon Valley or everybody in the tech industry
thinks that there's an algorithmic solution to misinformation. And what you're saying is exactly the opposite is we have to find a solution to the algorithms.

Chertoff: I think that that's a big part of it. And, you know, at some point if Congress can get out of the funk it's in, having some kind of a steady commission to look at these issues would be a useful thing. Because, again, I don't want to see us go too far in the direction of regulation because that would be disastrous, but I think we need to recognize that the Wild West is not a good model for this kind of activity.

Schwartz: Do you think we need like a national commission, kind of like we had with Baker Hamilton to address these issues? I mean, I could see you and a group of elders who really understand these issues, like Baker Hamilton did when we had the Iraq Study Group, looking at these issues in a substantive way and raising them to a national dialogue.

Chertoff: I think that would be very worthwhile. I mean, there are some private sector groups that are doing this, but I think if we can be plugged into a policy making process. You know that would be, I think, of value. I think this issue is only going to become more intense again in the post COVID environment as we do more activity online.

Miller: Can we turn to the subject of election security? You know, look, in the United States we're in about at the 20th anniversary of a whole sequence of close elections. I mean I'd go back to sort of the Florida recount in the 2000 election, Bush v. Gore. But ever since then we've been 51-49 elections pretty consistently in a lot of places so, close elections, number one. Number two, a decentralized system of elections for good reason, for constitutional reasons, I would argue that local state legislators and local boards of election run the elections. It’s not a centralized federal process or federal standards, of course, but what’s going on this year in your mind and what do you think we ought to look out for and can you think of any reforms that we undertake?

Chertoff: Well, I think, you know, decentralization is both a weakness and strength. It's a weakness in the sense that you have uneven resources, but it's a strength in that it makes it harder for somebody to kind of scale to run the table with manipulation. But here's what I am concerned about and I break it into three areas, in ascending order of concern. One, is disinformation and misinformation that manipulates people’s view of candidates or the issues. And the other is actual efforts to interfere with their voting process, either artificially or simply because we’re still dealing with it with a virus. And the third is, what do we do when the results come in, but it takes a longer time to tabulate? So, on the first, I do think that you’ve got a number of groups, including in the government, but also outside that are calling attention to disinformation campaigns, that are coming or being amplified by our adversaries overseas. But beyond that, I do hope that there’s an increasing sensitivity on the part of a public to be skeptical about some of they see over the internet about candidates. And you know, in much the same way when television was invented, it took people a while to develop a certain
skepticism about TV commercials, I think education is, I think, beginning to have some effect here. I'm more concerned that between the virus and perhaps some outbreaks of violence, that may be deliberately targeted at certain areas, we could see people getting afraid to go to the polls. And to me, that means we have to do whatever we can to make the way of voting as accessible as possible. I'm a real believer, we ought to make mail-in ballots available, without any need to make an excuse and they ought to be available soon so they can be submitted before election day. I'm also a little concerned frankly the Post Office may either through lack of resources or even interference kind of drag its feet a little bit on mail-in ballots.

Schwartz: I'm told that in Philadelphia they've already slowed the mail down in a pretty significant way.

Chertoff: That really concerns me because I will tell you that if you look at Pennsylvania and you look at the voting across the state, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, what I describes as more liberal and the middle of the state tends to be more conservative. So, it's not hard to figure out where you would want to mess with voting, if you wanted to try to affect the outcome of a swing state. So that is very concerning I think that needs to be looked at. But here's another suggestion: If we're worried about the mail, I think we ought to multiply significantly the number of places you can deposit a ballot. We can take every single school and shut it on election day and say we're going to post people and you can come and you can submit your ballot and put it in a box or something like that, it will be safeguarded. That will require hiring temporary workers and, of course, we have a lot of people out of work. But again, that will give people an alternative. So, to me mail, but also in person voting in workplaces is very important. And I'm assuming, when we're together it's going to take longer to count the votes. And it's not going to be like in the past where you know the network's get on 20 minutes after the polls close tell you who won. That's going to create an opportunity, both for Americans and foreigners to create mischief and trying to suggest the election is being rigged and trying to undermine it. And that is a real threat to our democracy. So, we need to have, first of all, give people a real heads-up. This is going to take a while. And we need to make sure that each election jurisdiction has in place, a way of visibly assuring the public that things are being counted properly. Now, usually you have representatives of the campaigns present to monitor and make sure there's nothing funny going on, but it may be that also we need to supplement that with state and local authorities, setting up commissions of some kind, to again validate the things were done appropriately. You know, we do this with other countries. We send election observers and maybe we need to do that here this time.

Schwartz: Now, NBC News reported last night that there's a Stanford professor who says that Congress needs to appropriate three to four billion dollars now, in the next two weeks, in order to get all the things you just said going or none of this is going to work.

Chertoff: I saw that case. I think, I mean I can't validate figure, but I do think we're running out of time. We got 90 days to go and temporizing is not I think
appropriate at this point. Now, you know, if Congress doesn’t want to do that then shame on them, because what they’re really saying is, we’re going to try to give advantage to ourselves at the expense of democracy. The irony being this by the way: I know that there are some people in the Republican Party who believe that if you make it hard to vote by mail is going to help Republicans. I actually think the reverse is true. I think the people most likely to not go to the polls are older people. I'm in that category and that's generally a more Republican-leaning cohort than the younger people. So, they may wind up shooting themselves in the foot. But no matter what, we shouldn’t be playing games with democracy.

Miler: When you’re recommending a series of steps here that actually would increase confidence and for me all the hubbub in the press, what that really does if that undermines people’s confidence in the fairness of elections and the certainty of results, then we’re in an even bigger mess. And we’ve taken a period of 51-49 elections to just a period of constant dispute.

Chertoff: Yes. And then you worry about an outbreak of violence.

Miller: Right.

Chertoff: As people take to the streets and we have some political figures who tacitly or even pretty overly encourage violence. And that could create more of a challenge in this country, maybe than the since the Civil War in terms of cohesiveness. And by the way, while we’re busy, worrying about, you know, internal conflict, our adversaries overseas will be making hay whether it be the Chinese or the Russians. And so, to me, you know, I don’t care what which party you’re with this is a national security issue, that traditionally we’ve had a bipartisan approach to. And the idea that we would sacrifice our national security because of parties and maneuvering is very, very disheartening.

Schwartz: So, switching gears just a little bit and I don’t want to make this all doom and gloom, but we have some issues we’re facing now. And you know just this week we had a hurricane come up the East Coast. We’re looking at hurricane season, you know, to add to our economic problems to add to our COVID problems to add to the uncertainty around the election. Now we’ve got hurricane season coming. Is FEMA, in your view, prepared to deal with this and, you know, are natural disasters and climate change in the age of COVID, you know, something we really need to look at in a different way.

Chertoff: So, these are two things. I mean I think FEMA is very overstretched and I think DHS, particularly because there are very few confirmed leaders, is having a hard time managing its responsibilities. I would say that, remember that most of the initial response to hurricanes comes again at the state and local level and one of the actual strengths of the country is the federal system creates a level of resilience, which is helpful, even if the federal government's not fully able to do what it has to do. But I think you raised an issue which I have increasingly come to believe needs to be seriously considered, which is climate change is going to have a major security effect. Over time, you could
drive mass migration as well as all kinds of catastrophic incidents all over the world, including the US. Whether it be flooding or fires, that's going to have major economic impact, as well as potential loss of life and property destruction. So, we need to start to get, again, this requires a global effort. And I would say that although I'm as skeptical as anybody about our adversaries and what their objectives are, I realized that they're rational individuals too and there are some areas where we ought to be able to reach an agreement, because we all hang together or we all hang separate. And I would say climate change is one of them. There's no way one country can insulate itself. We need to go even to our adversaries and say look, what is a practical way to start to mitigate climate change, reduce carbon emissions, maybe counteract them by doing more forest planting and also come up with strategies to reduce the effects, because we're not going to be able to totally reverse it. And I'm an all of the above person when it comes to dealing with climate change. You know, I don't want to make it into a religious thing where you have to make it as oppressive as possible, or you have to ignore it entirely. To me it's let's do all we can to mitigate the continued carbon and methane. Let's do what we can to reverse what we can and then let's recognize we may need to do things like build barriers to keep rising seas out or do other things in terms of how we manage our forest and we better do that as well.

Miller: You know, there's some recent polling on just general questions to Americans about how different organizations did during the COVID crisis, the health crisis and, not surprisingly, government didn't come out very well. I think the worst rated branch of government was the Congress. It was somewhere between dryer lint and dandruff. I mean, it really didn't look good for them. One of the surprises in this poll was how well the private sector was regarded and the people's appreciation for what happened. I think if they had asked separately about your local FedEx delivery person it would have been close to, you know, sainthood for those individuals. What do you think can be learned from the way particularly firms who seemed to lead the way in delivering for people in this crisis, what can be learned by the government for that and how do we how do we partner or apply that?

Chertoff: Well, I think in the past, I know when we've dealt with natural disasters, we've actually partnered with Walmart and other big box stores as ways of increasing distribution. One of the big challenges when you're dealing with disasters, is how do you get supplies to people. How do you manufacture enough, how do you deliver them? And the private sector has most of that capability. So, to me it's about planning and I think where there was a failure is that although we had plans that we had up when I was in office, and that were continued when they had H1N1 under the Obama administration. In the last couple years our planning on this kind of thing, kind of just went dry and planning and the team building is what you call upon where you are in an emergency.

Schwartz: Secretary Chertoff, you've been so generous with your time today. I can't thank you enough. Scott and I would love to be able to call you back and, you
know, in the months ahead to check in. So, thanks so much for being with us today on our podcast.

Miller: Fascinating comments. Thank you.

Chertoff: Thanks, and stay well.

Miller: Thanks, you too.

Schwartz: Thanks for listening to the reopening. If you liked this episode, please write us a review and subscribe wherever you find your podcasts. You can also find other podcasts from the Center for Strategic and International Studies at csis.org/podcasts.