

Open to Both Sides, Homeland Security Chief Steps Into Immigration Divide

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AUG. 5, 2014

WASHINGTON — Shortly after Jeh Johnson was confirmed as secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, he invited the flamboyant antiwar protesters from Code Pink to his new office to chat about national security and immigration.

A few months before, Code Pink demonstrators had projected a film about drone warfare onto the brick front of his stately Georgetown home, passing around popcorn and taunting Mr. Johnson, who had retreated to a neighbor's house but then wandered out to greet them. In his previous job as the Pentagon's general counsel, Mr. Johnson helped draft the legal justification for the military's use of armed drones.

"We were surprised that he took the time to speak with us" in his office, said Alli McCracken, the national coordinator of the group, whose members still strongly disagree with Mr. Johnson's policies. "It was nice."

Mr. Johnson's velvety style will be confronted with a far more difficult test as he faces off with Congress, governors, immigration advocates, businesses and other groups that are fighting over what to do about the record numbers of unaccompanied children from Central America slipping into the United States. As the cabinet member charged with securing the nation's borders, Mr. Johnson is mired in President Obama's efforts to send the Central American children back — and in a parallel White House debate about whether to allow a large portion of the 11 million illegal immigrants already in the United States to stay.

He is working closely with Mr. Obama, who is moving ahead without Congress and is to announce by the end of the summer an executive order that could possibly allow millions to stay in the country. "We're going to develop this together," Mr. Johnson said during an interview in his office at the Homeland Security headquarters in Northwest Washington. Will this make him the main absorber of the flames of debate? "Unfortunately, yes."

Immigration advocates are waiting to see what the administration does before deciding what to make of Mr. Johnson, who has been in office only eight months, but who went through the painstaking process, one dissenter at a time, of helping to make the legal case to repeal the military's discriminatory "don't ask, don't tell" policy against gay men and lesbians.

"We will have a better sense of who this man is in a couple weeks," said Lorella Praeli, the director of advocacy for United We Dream, the largest national network of young immigrants.

For now, Mr. Johnson, 56, the fourth secretary of a \$60 billion department that grew from the wreckage of the Sept. 11 attacks, is working all sides. He draws praise from Republican lawmakers over his support for changes to laws that would expedite deportations of the Central American children — a position Mr. Obama has backed away from and one many congressional Democrats deplore. At a recent meeting on Capitol Hill, Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, confronted Mr. Johnson about his view that the administration needed more flexibility to quickly send the children back.

Mr. Johnson's view is shared by many Republicans. "In my conversations with Secretary Johnson, he knows what needs to be done on the border," said Senator John Cornyn, Republican of Texas. "It remains to be seen if the president will allow him to be successful."

Yet Mr. Johnson also has the cautious support, so far, of many immigration advocates.

"Johnson is a product of the civil rights movement," said Frank Sharry, the executive director of America's Voice, a pro-immigration group. "He listens to everyone, from undocumented youth to hard-right anti-immigrants."

Immigration advocates also credit Mr. Johnson with speaking up about a border crisis that both Democrats and Republicans say the White House was slow to notice, even as the number of illegal immigrant children surged in the last year.

"I have worked on this topic since 2010," said Elizabeth Kennedy, an advocate and researcher who has studied the issue of illegal child immigrants and has struggled to get statistics from the Obama administration. "This year they started actually promoting the numbers."

Mr. Johnson said he ordered more resources to the Rio Grande area after he assumed office in late December, and made several visits to the border in the spring, often with lawmakers, to try to bring attention to the problem. He and his wife, Susan DiMarco, made an impromptu visit on Mother's Day to the McAllen, Tex., Border Patrol station, which was overflowing with Central American children.

They were confronted with table after table of children who had made dangerous trips across the border alone. One girl told Mr. Johnson that her mother was dead and that she was searching for her father. "My translator started to cry," Mr. Johnson told an audience in Aspen, Colo., last month. "I don't mind telling you I started to cry." The fate of the child, he said, "is something I will wonder about all the rest of my life."

At the Pentagon, Mr. Johnson at one point made extensive use of data to argue that the "don't ask, don't tell" rule should be repealed. He demonstrated that members of the Special Operations forces, the commandos who are the tip of the combat spear, were largely indifferent to the sexual orientation of fellow service members.

"Jeh was not somebody who kind of confronted that on the basis of, 'You're going to do it or else,'" said Leon E. Panetta, the former defense secretary. "He really listened to the concerns

and questions that were being raised and almost in every instance tried to respond to those concerns.” He added, “If it wasn’t for him I don’t think it would really have happened.”

Some facts about Mr. Johnson: His wife is a dentist, and he had to have several fillings and teeth whitenings before she would date him. His favorite restaurant is La Perla, an elaborate Italian place with friezes on Pennsylvania Avenue. When he writes speeches, he prefers to do so on a porch in Martha’s Vineyard, with headphones blasting Sam Cooke or James Brown. He was the first black partner at the law firm Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison. When he was general counsel at the Defense Department, he watched videos of every single drone strike he approved, to understand their impact. When it came time for him to leave the Pentagon, he was so emotional that he had his son read his parting remarks.

And he likes to garden.

“You see those white and red roses out there?” Mr. Johnson asked, peering out his office window at a mostly grim view of brick, concrete and a patch of weed-infested grass. “I planted those.” He also planted 200 impatiens at 6 a.m. outside his house on the morning that a Navy SEAL team killed Osama bin Laden, to work out some nerves.

He owns a bright blue Mustang convertible. “I saw this flashy car at the Pentagon and said, ‘What the hell is that about?’ ” Mr. Panetta recalled. “He did enjoy driving that little baby and parking it in front of the Pentagon. He thought that made more of a statement than anything else.”

At Paul Weiss, Mr. Johnson’s former colleagues see his new role as a synthesis of his old jobs.

“He is well suited for this terribly complicated immigration problem because he has perspective of a former federal prosecutor, so he understands the enforcement issues,” said Theodore V. Wells Jr., a partner at the firm. “And at the same time he is extraordinarily compassionate.”

He added: “There are multiple camps, some of them dug in, on the immigration front. Jeh appreciates that if you come up with a solution that is not acceptable to the public or Congress it may in theory be the right solution. But it’s not a solution you can sell.”

Mr. Johnson said he was acutely aware of the battles ahead. New policies, he said, need to “cherish our diversity, cherish our immigrant history and have respect for the laws that reflect our values. I’m responsible for border security. Our borders are not open to illegal immigration.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/07/15/us/questions-about-the-border-kids.html>