

TSA Meets Deadline - Remarks by Homeland Security Adviser Ridge

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Nearly 100 years after the miracle of flight began, we are here today to celebrate another historic milestone in aviation. Tomorrow, every one of our nation's 429 commercial airports will be staffed and secured by professional screeners. More than 44,000 dedicated men and women have been hired, trained and deployed to screen passengers and assure the safety of our skies. Each has received more than 100 hours of classroom and on-the-job training for this important responsibility.

The bottom line: The Department of Transportation, under the extraordinary leadership of their secretary, Norm Mineta, Deputy Secretary Michael Jackson and Admiral [James] Loy, will successfully meet the one-year deadline set by President Bush when he signed the Aviation and Transportation Security Act on November 19, 2001.

-- Applause --

Within 10 days of the passage of that legislation, I can recall Secretary Mineta coming to the White House, to the Oval Office with a blueprint for building this unprecedented new agency. The Transportation Security Administration began in January with a mission statement and about a dozen employees, and look where we are today.

You know, shortly I'll have the privilege of introducing Secretary Mineta and he can chronicle what I consider to be one of the most extraordinary organizational achievements they've seen in this town in a long, long time. And again, to the Secretary and to Michael Jackson and to the Admiral and all of the hardworking men and women at the Department of Transportation and TSA, we say: "Congratulations on a job very, very well done."

I might add that Norm's team not only beat the deadline, they have beat expectations. I remember watching the television and the talking heads -- listening to the talking heads and meeting with all the journalists and all the opinion leaders who said, "There's no way, Mr. Secretary, you can possibly meet this deadline, no way." Well, we are here today to prove that they were wrong.

However, we must temper our pride in this achievement, knowing terrorism is a permanent threat and our airports an enduring vulnerability. We have seen the lengths terrorists will go to penetrate airport security. They are just as determined to destroy innocent lives as we are determined to protect them. And make no mistake, we must be ever vigilant because they will try again.

That is why we must now take the next historic step in securing our homeland. I'm going to take this opportunity to encourage the Senate of the United States today and tomorrow to complete their work on the new Department of Homeland Security. It will enable us to unify our homeland security responsibilities under one department with one primary mission: Protection of American citizens and their way of life.

Having one department will make it easier for us to build partnerships with state and local government and with the private sector, including the aviation industry. This is absolutely critical if we are to find solutions to our most pressing security challenges.

We all understand that airlines are critical, vital arteries of our global economy. The Wright Brothers would be astonished to learn that eight million flights, nearly 600 million passengers and \$12 billion in freight go through U.S. airports annually. And I'm confident that this new agency will continue to look for ways to improve service, as it seeks to improve security.

In time, I suspect we will employ 21st century technology, biometrics, smart cards and other forms of positive identification, as well as even more sophisticated explosive detection systems. And, of course, we rely on the

training and the efforts, the instincts and the experience of the 44,000 men and women who work at TSA to make sure that on a day-to-day basis we use good, old-fashioned common sense at every gate, at every airport around this country.

Admiral Loy likes to talk about some of the rules that add to passenger stress levels without reducing the risk, and I suspect in time he'll eliminate or modify all of those, as well. In this new era, we must all think anew. We must keep in mind passengers' daily routines as we provide them with this new measure of protection.

I'm confident we can do this. In fact, early results suggest that up to 95 percent of passengers are being screened in 10 minutes or less. That's great news for the traveling public.

So today is a milestone, but it is not an ending. New and important deadlines loom ahead. Meeting those deadlines will not guarantee that we are 100 percent secure from terrorism. But based on the progress to date, we can look forward to a far, far safer future.

Mr. Secretary, you have built a terrific model here. I remember that first meeting in the Oval Office. I remember the mission statement; a very complex piece of legislation. A lot of people inside and outside government just really didn't think you'd be able to build this structure, train 45,000 folks and get them all deployed within the year time frame. But because of your leadership -- you surrounded yourself with some great people who we've identified earlier, and you got the commitment from those 44,000 men and women who volunteered to help you secure the airlines and our skies -- you did it.

So just on a personal note, I think it's important to recognize what an extraordinary job Secretary Norm Mineta has done. He was passionate about meeting the deadlines, getting these individuals trained on time, deployed on time, and made a commitment to the President that he could get it done, he could meet those deadlines. So we celebrate the success of this organization, an extraordinary accomplishment of a great public servant.

It is my great pleasure to introduce to you our Secretary of Transportation Norm Mineta.

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