

Transcript of Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at Johns Hopkins University “Transatlantic Homeland Security Conference”

Release Date: 09/13/04 00:00:00

Washington, D.C.
Johns Hopkins University
Center for Transatlantic Relations
Transatlantic Homeland Security Conference
September 13, 2004

Secretary Ridge:

David, thank you very much for those very kind words, overly generous, but greatly appreciated. We have so many distinguished guests here. Frankly, my staff listed a couple of pages worth, but I just want to point out a couple. The Grand Duke, it's a pleasure and honor to be in your company. I very much appreciate your personal involvement in this series of seminars and the work you're doing with this great institution. I want to say to my friend Peter Terpeluk, Mr. Ambassador, it's great to see you again.

And a lot of great people in this town have dedicated a lot of their lives to public service, but I daresay none greater than Lee Hamilton, with whom I had the pleasure of serving in the Congress of the United States, who basically, from my perspective, co-chaired the 9/11 Commission. They had the chair and a vice-chair, but I think they demonstrated in a bipartisan way that there was a mutual effort to look at a one of the worst tragedies in American history to come up with identification of some problems and challenges associated with it in a very, very appropriate bipartisan or apolitical way to say, “These are the challenges, these are weaknesses, these are the gaps. Here we think here's how we think you ought to fill them”. So it's always a pleasure to be with you, Lee. Thank you very much.

Let me thank the Luxembourg Group, the Center for Transatlantic Relations at Johns Hopkins, as well as the Woodrow Wilson International Center for your work to further our understanding about the threat of global terrorism, and perhaps more importantly, I'm grateful for those efforts on your part to foster a dialogue, a conversation on how we can combat this threat together.

As the Grand Duke pointed out, it's got to be a collaborative enterprise, and any conversations or any form of dialogue that we can better understanding each other's perspective and identify common solutions to common problems, the civilized world will be that much further ahead, because we'll get it done more effectively and a lot sooner that way.

I appreciate very much His Royal Highness, the Grand Duke of Luxembourg, and commend him for your country's steadfast commitment in your efforts on the war on terror. You have been a very strong partner, particularly in the arena of dealing with international terrorism financing, and for this and for many other efforts undertaken within your country in support of a global effort to combat terrorism, with are thankful.

I certainly look forward to our continued work together, both within the administration and the Department of Homeland Security. Luxembourg, I think, accedes to preside over the European Union the beginning of next year, and again, the US-EU connection is critical to our collective effort to combat international terrorism.

Because we know the fight against international terrorism is not just America's fight. It's the fight of every nation and every citizen that stands on the side of hope and the side of liberty, and as we know all too well from the terrorist attacks in Bali and Baghdad, Istanbul, Madrid, Beslan, terrorism is a global enemy, and therefore, it requires a global response.

International terrorism has become the new totalitarian threat. Unlike the past, we now face an enemy with no flag, no borders, no elected representatives, nothing but deeply held hatred and a desire to see peace-loving representative government, as well as our citizens, undermined in the institutions of government, in the economies that sustain them.

We certainly face an enemy that seeks chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear weapons, and I don't believe there's any doubt in anyone's mind that have studied these terrorists that if they had a weapon of mass effect in their possession, they'd certainly find a way to use it.

It's no coincidence, it's truly no coincidence that the threat to the stability and the peace of the world has coincided with the globalization of technology, commerce, transportation, and communication. The same benefits enjoyed by peaceful-loving, freedom-loving people across the world are available now to terrorists, as well. That means terrorists themselves have greater mobility, more targets to choose from, and more places to hide than ever before; so to fight back, we, too, must exploit our assets, we must utilize diplomacy, intelligence, law enforcement, and asset seizure, a multi-lateral approach to a multi-national problem.

We must enlist stronger collaboration and cooperation, and improve information sharing both within nations and between, for that matter, among nations. We must use every available tool to repel these shadow soldiers. One of the most valuable tools in our arsenal is strong partnerships, partnerships both national and global in scope, partnerships that build barriers to terrorists and build bridges to one another, partnerships that eliminate gaps our enemies could otherwise exploit.

The United States shares an incredibly important partnership with the European Union and her member nations. In nearly every field of human endeavor, we are bound together by common interests, common goals, and mutual respect. We both realize that security for our individual countries and for freedom throughout the world must rely on collective action. As airplanes connect family and friends across oceans and cargo ships make ports of call around the world, we must find ways to work together to reduce our common vulnerabilities to terrorist attack.

Now, already in pursuit of this mission, we have seen unprecedented cooperation at the international level, and I might add, much of it with the through the European Union. With our allies and friends around the world, we initiated the container security initiative, or in this country, the acronym is CSI. For the Grand Duke, we couldn't live without acronyms in Washington and in Washington, DC. When I was governor of Pennsylvania, everything's got to have an acronym.

But under this program, CSI container security initiative the United States has placed Customs and border protection inspectors at 25 foreign seaports, from Vancouver to Rotterdam to Singapore. We actually work in conjunction with and in partnership with our allies to not only review the manifests of 100 percent of the containers, but those that give us some concern, give us some doubt, pull them off with our allies and run them through an X-ray machine.

The United States and European Community recently signed an agreement that calls for the prompt expansion of CSI throughout that part of the world. This agreement will intensify and broaden Customs cooperation and mutual assistance in Customs matters between the EU and the US. With this agreement, we have pledged to share tools, information, and best practices necessary to secure our ports and our oceans from attack.

I recall, in the first few months of serving as Secretary, boarding a ship in the harbor of New Orleans, and the ship was registered in Singapore, the crew was Indian, the cargo was American grain, and its destination was Japan.

Everybody, at least four countries, had an interest in making sure that that crew, that vessel, and the contents got safely to and from various ports of call.

In addition, we have also worked closely with the European Union on passenger name recollection again, another acronym, PNR data access agreement which formalizes and governs the PNR data transfer related to flights between Europe and the United States. The PNR data is substantially similar to information that these travelers would normally give to our US Customs and border protection officers when they landed at our ports of entry. And by working with the EU to get the information before they disembark from the planes, we also, in addition, have a chance to review and match those names against watch lists that we might have but it expedites the process of people clearing through the port of entry when they visit our country.

Receiving PNR information before a flight's arrival will facilitate and expedite the entry of the vast majority of visitors who travel to the United States. We must remain as open and welcoming in a post-9/11 world as we were in a pre-9/11 world, particularly important to a country who's past, present, and future will be tied to a continuing stream of immigrants from around the rest of the world.

We must not forget that, while this agreement will allow homeland security officials to protect America against terrorism and other trans-national threats, it also contains and this was some real hard-nosed, face-to-face, multilateral bargaining it also contains appropriate privacy protections that again reflect the shared values of both the United States and the European Union. All of the additional security capabilities that we are building have not, will not, and cannot ever come at the expense of our individual liberties.

Now, while we have accomplished much together, obviously, we can't allow whatever achievements or success that we've seen to this point to lull us into any kind of complacency or lose our sense of urgency. The terrorists are constantly at work adaptable, untiring. The 9/11 Commission, if I recall, called them sophisticated, patient, and lethal, and they are all of that, so we cannot afford to let up. We must continue to rise to new levels of security and protection for our nations and our respective citizens.

Our next step in making our borders more secure in our shared efforts is our shared efforts to promote travel document security, to incorporate interoperable biometric indicators on passports and visas. I think we all agree that biometrics can be a very, very useful security tool, allowing us to accurately identify and cross-check travelers and potential terrorists before they enter our respective countries.

In America, we've already seen, through our US visit program, that biometric information can provide an added layer of security while at the same time bringing travelers across our borders with greater ease and convenience. I think many

of you are familiar with the US visit program. We were required to establish the program by the Congress. We did just that. Photographs and two fingerprints are recorded. It gives us an opportunity to match those against whatever database we have, both name and fingerprint database.

We're also working on an easy means to facilitate this process when individuals exit, so we know when they arrived and when they departed. Since the beginning of the year, US visit has processed more than 8 million legitimate passengers, and since the program began, we have matched more than 1,000 potential entrants against various kinds of watch lists that we had. Most of them were on criminal watch lists.

However, to apply the use of biometrics globally, we must develop a set of international standards, and I guess this is the point that I would like to make and emphasize. It's not about a US standard or an EU standard and another world standard, but the sooner that the world community can embrace an international standard for biometrics, the quicker we'll be able to secure our borders and make sure that those who visit our respective countries come in with at least a benign if not a hopeful and helpful intent to participate and contribute to our countries.

I think it's critical that we move this along as quickly as possible, and the best way of facilitating that is not simply on a bilateral-by-bilateral basis, but to get as much multilateral buy-in as soon and as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, you should know, we will develop a set of international standards hopefully to capture, analyze, store, read, and protect biometric data in order to ensure maximum interoperability between systems. If we have a system, it needs somehow to be connected with yours, if that's your request, and maximum privacy for our citizens. In the meantime, we are currently working with participating countries, including many within the European Union, in the visa waiver program, to develop machine-readable passports that incorporate biometric identifiers.

As nations work to meet the deadline set in place to accomplish biometric passports, in the interim, all visa waiver countries will be enrolled in the US visit program, to ensure maximum security for European Union countries as well as the United States.

In the end, security should not place an undue burden on any single country. We should be able to work together, be flexible, and ever focused on the task at hand. We all know the stakes are high, and sometimes that means greater sacrifice of resources and finances to ensure our citizens have the level of security they require and deserve.

Let us be clear. All of our efforts need to be aimed at putting the burden where it belongs, squarely in the lap of the terrorists, pushing them down with the force of our collective efforts so that they cannot rise to perpetrate their deadly and destructive schemes.

In the three years since 9/11, the European Union has been a steadfast ally in this fight, a partnership that was reaffirmed in late June when President Bush signed the EU-US Declaration on Combating Terrorism. Now, that document, while recognizing our past successes, lays out our priorities for the future, priorities such as the disruption of terrorist travel, prevention of cyber-attacks, greater border security strength, and effective attack on terrorists' financial resources. It is an ambitious and a strong plan for the future, and one that can only be accomplished through our continued cooperation, and that most important word, partnership.

In the end, the war on terror is not a test of military strength, but it's really a test of will, it's a test of endurance. The terrorists have no plans to surrender their arms in the near future. Quite on the contrary, I think we all understand this is going to be a long, protracted, difficult fight, a fight that will test the strength of our nations, the strength of our alliances, and the strength of our citizens.

But, as partners and friends, we know we've faced hard fights before, from the shores of Normandy to the Battle of the Bulge to the long winter of the cold war. As allies, we have continued to press forward and hold fast to our mutual belief in the power of freedom and democracy.

Together, we stared down the daunting armies of Hitler, stared down the oppression of communism, and united in our determination, won great victories for liberty.

Today, we stare down the callous soldiers of hate, stare down the horrific reality of global terrorism, and once again, stand united in our determination to defeat it, and I have every confidence that we, too, will win through win through to a day a peace and security for freedom-loving nations and peoples everywhere.

Again, I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to share these observations with you, and I understand if we have time we could have a little question and answer period.

Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen.

Mr. Metzner: Thank you, Mr. Secretary. We will have time for a few questions. Who would like to go first?

Question:

Thank you, Mr. Secretary, for your remarks. Given that there are universities supporting this event today, let me ask

I thank you, Mr. Secretary, for your remarks. Given that there are universities supporting this event today, let me ask you about the tremendous drop in enrollment in American universities by foreign students following September 11th, and what is the administration doing about that, seeing that a stint in the U.S., in an American university, can have a lifelong benefit to the individual and also to Americans?

Secretary Ridge: Well, I think it is held universally within the administration -- but it's said on both sides of the aisle -- that one of the best long-term antidotes to combating international terrorism is to keep the borders secure, but the doors open, to welcome people from around the entire world to participate and experience the American experience.

And we know right after September 11th, where there was such a heavy emphasis placed on security, that the number of students applying to our colleges and universities dropped considerably. Once we created the Department of Homeland Security, in recognition of that particular problem, we realized we had to do something differently, and we certainly had to do something better.

So we sat down with the colleges and universities and said, "If you will help partner us with this effort, partner with the Department, we will set up a system that will expedite the entry of students overseas". So we set up a student exchange/visitor information system, and last year was the first time that we've had complete control of this with our partners.

And last year we let into this country about 300,000 students, without delay, without any difficulty at the borders, because both the schools and the Department of Homeland Security created an organization where we had 24/7 connectivity, so if there's a question about a student who might have forgotten the right documentation, we could verify that they were enrolled at the university, and welcome, come on in. You contribute to multiculturalism in the university, you contribute to the community, and hopefully you may stay, you may go back to your own country.

So we want to encourage that. But in that process we kept 200 people out. I have no idea what their intentions were, but they weren't coming here to go to school. So, again, working in partnership the colleges and universities, we've designed a system, and we continue to work on it with an eye toward making some changes in visa policy as well.

We've been working with the Department of State. You better believe Secretary Powell is very interested in making some of these adjustments, and we've been working internally with the administration to open the doors wider.

We've made a lot of changes, very dramatic changes to enhance security at the border. We can be a little more comfortable about opening those doors wider. We're working on that. As we speak there are a couple things in play that we think will facilitate that.

Question:

Concerning the privacy of the information that is collected in order to oversee the entire security operation, please -- other than the obvious problem which is being worked against of such a database being cracked by people who shouldn't, what, in your view, are the greatest dangers to privacy that you are working to forestall and to make sure that these dangers are not realized?

Secretary Ridge:

At the heart of our negotiations and discussion with the European Union there are two fundamental principles. One is access, unlimited use. Who has access to that information, and for what purpose is it intended?

And to that end, I think it's important to note that the Department of Homeland Security is the first agency -- first federal level agency within the federal government who by law is required to have a privacy officer and a privacy staff.

So at any time we consider even at a conceptual stage any potential change in existing policy that affects getting information from individuals, both overseas or domestic, we understand that can be a complicating factor, since we do need at all times to protect that privacy.

For example, we have a new program that we're trying to move our domestic passengers through more quickly at airports to avoid secondary inspection. We're running five pilots. It's called a -- basically a registered traveler program.

They give us -- they volunteer information to us. They are assured, one, that it is -- access is limited to a small group of people; and, two, the information is actually encrypted. So every step along the way, whether it's domestically or internationally, I mean, that's -- frankly, it's a common theme or venue that is shared among democracies and freedom-loving people generally.

We're very concerned about privacy and how even limited information can be potentially used in a manner for which it was not initially contributed. So we work that issue constantly. It was a -- we worked it for several months with the European Union, and finally we were able to give them the assurances with regard to access and intended use.

And we also said to the European Union, this is the -- if you agree to this, we agree to come back in six months or a

year from now and see if you're satisfied that the conditions we set have been met, so that the in future discussions about privacy, you can be satisfied that we kept our word. Very appropriate on their part, from the get-go, it's a very high priority.

The President just signed an executive order as well with regard to dealing with this issue, and administration-wise, it's not just the Department of Homeland Security. And with the deputy attorney general and my undersecretary for boat and transportation security -- they're chairs and vice-chairs, but it will include others from within the federal government so that administration-wide we have a rigorous policy of privacy protection.

We've made a lot of progress in that area over the past two years.

Question:

Does the administration or you subscribe to the carrying of identification cards on the basis of your planning for the future?

Secretary Ridge:

The legislation that created the Department of Homeland Security was very specific on the question of a national ID card. They said there will be no national ID card.

To that end, however, within the Department we have been directed and will, one, develop identification cards for people involved in the transportation industry, and that have access to sensitive, potentially vulnerable and exploitable venues, places in the private sector.

We are working with the governors -- again, we have a federal system. It's really rather unique. We can't really say to the governors -- and I was very protective as governor of my prerogatives in the federal system. One thing I never liked from the federal government were unfounded mandates, or the federal government telling me how to run Pennsylvania.

But having said that, we've been working with the governors to see if we could at least come up with some common -- a baseline of information that all the governors would use for driver's license purposes, because in this country the driver's license is probably the most frequently reached for form of identification.

I notice in the private sector, without any encouragement from the federal government, there are a lot of employers that are using biometrics for their employees to gain access to their places of work and places of business.

We are constrained from developing a national ID card, but not constrained from trying to develop some just basic standards, that regardless of the kind of card you issue -- transportation worker, nuclear worker, federal employee -- there will be some basic information on it that we can all refer to and consider as reliable.

Question: Okay.

Secretary Ridge: All right.

Mr. Metzner: Thank you, Mr. Secretary.

Secretary Ridge: Thank you.