

# Operation Liberty Shield: Press Briefing by Secretary Ridge

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SECRETARY RIDGE: Good morning. Last night, the United States government launched Operation Liberty Shield to increase security and readiness in the United States. This comprehensive national plan of action will help protect our citizens, our infrastructure and, very importantly, help deter those who plan further terrorist attack.

Liberty Shield is a unified operation that integrates selected national protective measures with the involvement and, I might add, terrific support of federal, state, local and private responders and authorities from around the country. Last night, we contacted all state governors, all state homeland security advisors and leaders from other state, county and local organizations, as well as the private sector, and reviewed these measures with them. I specifically asked the nation's governors to deploy National Guard and other law enforcement personnel at critical locations around their respective states.

Operation Liberty Shield focuses on the following imperatives: We will increase security at our borders. There will be more Coast Guard air and sea patrols off our shores and in our ports. More escorts of passenger ships, and hundreds of more agents and resources on the border. We will strengthen security for our transportation systems. There will be more security at airports and rail facilities around the country. Amtrak and other private railroad companies will implement security measures to protect passengers and hazardous cargo. New flight restrictions have temporarily been put in place over certain U.S. cities.

We will continue measures to disrupt threats to our nation. The FBI, the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security are working closely to identify and stop those who would facilitate terrorist activity through fundraising, logistical support and recruitment. We will protect our critical infrastructure. There will be increased Coast Guard patrols near our key petroleum and chemical facilities and more security at facilities handling radioactive materials. We will continue to monitor the Internet for signs of a potential terrorist attack, cyber terrorism, hacking and state-sponsored information warfare. And the Department of Treasury has taken steps to protect our financial network and payment systems.

We will increase disease surveillance and food security. The Department of Health and Human Services has alerted state and local health departments, hospitals and medical care providers to report any unusual disease or disease patterns. There will be greater inspection of imported food. The Department of Agriculture has alerted employees and representatives throughout the food and agricultural community to take extra precautions to monitor feedlots, stockyards, processing plants, import and storage areas.

And finally, our response and recovery teams and resources throughout our nation are mobilized, in position and ready. Now, we have taken these actions because intelligence reporting indicates that while al Qaeda and those sympathetic to our cause are still a principal threat, the principal threat, Iraqi state agents, Iraqi surrogate groups, other regional extremist organizations and ad hoc groups with disgruntled individuals may use this time period to conduct terrorist attacks against the United States and our interests here or abroad.

The increase in the threat level is a signal to law enforcement, government officials at all levels and representatives of the private sector to implement specific protective measures, just as they have done on two previous occasions. In response to the question of individual Americans, what do I do, first and foremost, we encourage you to be informed. Some good sources of information to learn what emergency precautions you can take are the Ready.gov website.

In addition, your support and participation in reporting potential threats or suspicious activities to federal, state

or local law enforcement authorities adds significantly to our defense.

Lastly, during this period of heightened alert, there is bound to be misinformation. Don't react to rumors. We will strive to get the facts out as soon as we can.

Let me close by saying, your federal government is ready, professionals at all levels are ready, those in your states and in your communities and those in the private sector. And because of this very comprehensive, very coordinated effort, America is ready.

Thank you very much.

Q: Could you tell us more about the detentions of asylum seekers, how many you think will be detained and how many countries, and how long do you expect them to be detained?

SECRETARY RIDGE: The detention of asylum seekers is basically predicated on one basic notion. We just want to make sure that those who are seeking asylum, number one, are who they say they are and, two, are legitimately seeking refuge in our country because of political repression at home, not because they choose to cause us harm or bring destruction to our shores. So, again, the detention will be constructed around that purpose.

Q: From how many nations will they be?

SECRETARY RIDGE: Pardon me?

Q: How many nations are included in that list?

SECRETARY RIDGE: Well, we'll be looking, obviously scrutinizing all asylum seekers at this time. But there are countries who we believe are supportive of al Qaeda or countries where we know there is an al Qaeda network or other terrorist organizations and it will be those countries we are looking at specifically.

Q: If I can follow up on that, how many people do you know will be affected and for how long? And if you could elaborate a little bit more on what is the precedent for detaining people for whom we have no specific suspicion that they are terrorists, and why take that extreme act?

SECRETARY RIDGE: This approach has been done in the past. Last year, I think in 2002, given the category of countries we're talking about, those who where we know there are known, existing terrorist organizations, al Qaeda and others, I think there were about 600 people that were temporarily detained, and about I think 60 percent of them were Iraqis.

So again, the purpose behind the temporary detention is fairly straightforward. We want to make absolutely certain during this period of time you are who you say you are, and you're coming to this country that invites people from around the world that has been open and welcoming to people around the world. But if you're seeking asylum for political purposes, we want to make absolutely certain that that's why you're here.

Q: Mr. Secretary, state officials last night said that they were told that there was a near certainty of an attack. Do you believe that's an accurate statement, near certainty of an attack?

SECRETARY RIDGE: Well, I think the message was we know we have been attacked before, we know that our interests have been attacked abroad and we should prepare for potential attacks either here or abroad at this time. I think you just need to categorize it as saying that it's our responsibility, whether we're at the federal government, state government or local government, to be prepared for any attempted attack against our interests, and that's exactly what this coordinated national effort is designed to do.

Q: Aside from the steps the federal government is taking, a lot of the steps you're asking the states and local governments to take, as well as the private sector and Amtrak, for example, are very expensive. It's becoming a refrain over and over again that they can't afford these kinds of steps. Did you hear that last night? And how much of a concern is it for you about how long they can maintain this kind of security?

SECRETARY RIDGE: The first priority that everyone accepted last night, without hesitation, was the need to work together to make sure that we implemented Liberty Shield. No one asked about additional finances.

Now, the President has said there would be a supplemental and, under those circumstances, there may be an opportunity to help the states. But I must tell you that last night, when we had the conference call with the

governors and then we went back to the individual states and their homeland security advisors, everybody understood the number one priority is to protect America and our way of life, and we'll see what happens in terms of whether there's an ability to share or defray some of these costs at the federal level at a later time. Time will tell.

Q: Secretary Ridge, you talked about increasing security at petrochemical plants, Coast Guard patrols and so forth on the waterways. The General Accounting Office is coming out with a report today saying orange alert or not, security at these plants is -- there are no federal regulations requiring as far as anti-terrorism measures, and that it's just absolutely abysmal. There are at least 123 that are nearby populations where if a plant was blown up, people would be significantly harmed by debris or fallout from those petrochemical plants. How concerned are you about terrorist attacks on those, those facilities?

SECRETARY RIDGE: There is no question that when we take a look at a chemical facility, the possibility that terrorists could use that economic asset and turn it into a weapon is something that we need to be concerned about and are concerned about, and was the subject of conversations last night with governors.

But I would share with you that the GAO is concerned about it, and rightly so. So is the federal government. So are the governors. So are the chemical companies. One of the areas where we are coordinating our efforts is enhanced security around these facilities in the days ahead.

So it is a legitimate concern but it is not unknown to everyone responsible for security measures around those facilities, and additional security measures will be taken.

Q: This -- we're going up to orange again very soon after the last time. But this time we're hearing a lot about security in the food industry, and taking extra precautions with feedlots and storage and transportation of foodstuffs. Is there a particular reason why you're concerned about our food?

SECRETARY RIDGE: I think the Department of Agriculture and the food and agricultural industry since September 11th have elevated security and have taken additional precautionary measures. I know it's certainly something the Secretary of Agriculture has directed and led. And again, as we put together a coordinated national effort to enhance security, we identified potential -- potential problems within agriculture in the community. So again, it's with the notion that we have a national plan. Clearly, a basic staple for our existence, our food and food processing, and working with the Secretary of Agriculture and the private sector just to make sure that the preventive measures that they've undertaken in the past are sustained. And, depending on the facility, enhanced as a part of our objective.

I think what we need to understand, and hopefully -- we need to remind ourselves from time to time that bin Laden and al Qaeda and the network of terrorists around the world have historically targeted the broadest possible range of economic interests, national interests, symbolic interest in our country. I daresay if you went back and take a look at the list of threats that have -- generic threats, generic targets that we've heard from bin Laden and al Qaeda and the network the past 17 months, you'll find just about everything that we view as assets and very important to our way of life has been included in that on a list somewhere.

And so, again, as we developed Liberty Shield, taking the broadest possible approach to ensuring that there was a level of precaution, a level of prevention, a level of security, again, across all national interests was at the heart of what we were trying to do.

Q: Mr. Secretary, you mentioned increase in security on the border. As we get close to a war with Iraq, how vulnerable is the border with Mexico and Canada? And will you be willing to deploy the National Guard to secure the border, whether it's for 48 hours or 24 hours? Have you considered that?

SECRETARY RIDGE: One of the phone calls we made last night was to our counterparts in Canada and Mexico. And even before last night, my counterpart in Mexico, Secretary Creel had said that his government would do everything they can with us or in the interior part of their country to protect American citizens and American interests. At the present time, we are redeploying assets, personnel and other assets at the borders. But we, at this juncture, don't envision more National Guard there.

We have more agents there than we had on September 12th of 2001 when we had that enormous backlog. But we believe working with our counterparts in Mexico and Canada who have volunteered to work closely with us, we are going to do everything we can to minimize the inconvenience. The President of Mexico and the Prime Minister of Canada, we all want to make sure that we minimize the inconvenience for legitimate people and legitimate goods. But we have two willing partners and I think we can get the enhanced security

we need through continued cooperation with our partners.

Q: Sir, you described the expulsion of people you concluded were Iraqi agents. Can you describe how many, when and what your suspicions about them were? Who are these people?

SECRETARY RIDGE: I think it's best to let the FBI comment on that. They did, as you know, consider a couple of those assigned diplomatically as persona non grata and exited -- asked that -- showed them the door. And I think they could be in a better position to explain to you the specifics of that.

Q: Mr. Secretary, this Liberty Shield is clearly the most comprehensive response yet. How much of that is due to just the fact that you've had a longer time to prepare yourself for this? How much of it is due to specific threat information?

SECRETARY RIDGE: You're right, it has taken a while to prepare. But, more importantly, it is executed because of what we've learned through the intelligence community and what bin Laden has said, particularly in recent weeks. You know, we have maintained an elevated level of threat and on two occasions took it to orange. On those occasions, there was specific, credible information. One, was we were also concerned about the holiday, remember, the one-year anniversary of the first -- the attack on September 11th. The second, there was specific information and the Muslim holy period of the Hajj.

This instance, we have again not only continued credible information from within the intelligence community but bin Laden himself has said in recent weeks that military action in Iraq would be a rallying cry, a potential call to others, not just to al Qaeda but to others. So, again, I think America wants us to be prepared, America wants us to take precautionary measures. But we need to understand it's all predicated upon what bin Laden and the terrorists have said and what they've claimed they will do under certain sets of circumstances. And it's our job to be prepared.

Q: Mr. Secretary, this is a long laundry list, but how much of this is actually new? Is this threat level orange different than the previous threat level oranges? And secondly, a lot of this urging the private sector to do something, asking the private sector to do something. How confident are you that the private sector will do their part?

SECRETARY RIDGE: First of all, as you know, there is a range of activities we call upon government and others to do, depending on the level of threat. And historically, on the two occasions we've raised it to orange before, we saw a robust response from government and response from the private sector.

But if you take a look at, for example, what we would do at ports under orange, there would be obviously an enhancement of patrol activity, there would be repositioning of assets. We've just escalated that somewhat. There's even -- there are going to be more patrols, there will be more activity at the ports. At the borders, we do certain things when we go to orange. This is in addition to the things we would normally do at orange, we are going to reposition people and assets.

Again, we engaged the governors and the private sector to work together to protect critical pieces of infrastructure around the country, and we will be monitoring and working with the governors and the private sector to see that these critical pieces of infrastructure which are assets to our economy, but if terrorists attack could turn it into the equivalent of a weapon of mass destruction. We will monitor that activity and make sure the security enhancements we think are necessary are being implemented.

Q: What is going to be the impact on the traveling public and on commerce of these measures? Do you expect long lines at airports again, long lines --

SECRETARY RIDGE: We are going to do everything possible to minimize inconvenience to citizens and the disruption to commerce. Clearly, many of the things that have done -- we have done over the past year plus, particularly the addition of technology at our borders and at our airports, trained baggage screeners and trained personnel to check the passengers, we've done a lot of things even prior to this occasion to facilitate travel and to facilitate commerce. And again, as we implement these measures it is with an eye toward doing everything we can to keep that disruption to a minimum.

Q: Mr. Secretary, what is being done differently in Liberty Shield at airports and airspace? And do you think that civil aviation is particularly threatened? The airline industry is suffering economically, tremendously, from the situation.

SECRETARY RIDGE: There are -- again, we build on the foundation that has been built over the past year. If I might just -- a little history with regard to the aviation industry. If you take a look at the layered defenses we now have in place, that are in the process of being put into place to protect the aviation public, we begin the training for the pilots in the cockpits with firearms. Then you've got the hardened cockpit doors. You have training for the flight attendants. You have more federal air marshals. You come outside the airplane itself and you have technology, 100 percent inspection of baggage, you have new trained inspectors for passengers. You have enhanced airport security outside the perimeter. There will be additional random inspections of vehicles and potentially, depending on the airport, some limitations of ingress and egress into the airport. But, by and large, over a period of time -- and that's what America is doing -- over a period of time, we strengthen ourselves. And one of the best examples is the aviation industry.

Q: Yes, Governor, you mentioned last week some concern about suicide bombers. And I just wondered what in Liberty Shield is specifically directed toward protection against suicide bombers?

SECRETARY RIDGE: I mentioned last week in response to a very appropriate question about the difficulty of defending against that kind of attack and I think we're quite aware of that particular challenge. And I think the most effective means will be, one, if we have specific information about an individual or location, we can respond to it. But I think here is where the public's awareness, the public's alertness, its sensitivity to its own surroundings could be of assistance as well. But we -- I think it's pretty clear, given circumstances that we have all learned about and, unfortunately, have even witnessed the repercussions on television in international venues, it's one of the most difficult forms of terrorism against which we would be called upon to protect ourselves and our communities.

Q: Mr. Secretary, can you talk a little bit about the situation right now on the Mall near the Vietnam Memorial? Are you monitoring the situation? Is there any sign that this is terrorism? And what would you say to people who raise concerns that if a seemingly unconnected, lone individual can cause such disruption in Washington, that perhaps our homeland security system is not really ready to protect us from a coordinated attack?

SECRETARY RIDGE: First of all, I would say that the local law enforcement and, now in conjunction working with the FBI, are handling it appropriately. Secondly, there is nothing for us to indicate at this time that it's in any way connected with the kind of terrorism that we're talking about right now. Thirdly, I would tell you that under any set of circumstances, I suspect that the local law enforcement community and the FBI would have responded to an individual who claims to have an explosive device in a similar fashion.

So the fact of the matter is, again, the collaboration between or among the different levels of law enforcement since September 11th continues to get better. And when it gets better, our country gets safer and stronger.

Q: Mr. Secretary, you talked about strengthening the borders and putting more agents out there. But for the past couple of years, the Border Patrol has had a lot of trouble filling its ranks, even hiring the people that Congress authorized. Where are you getting these agents and how -- how well are they trained to be able to handle this, the borders?

SECRETARY RIDGE: First of all, because of congressional interest and congressional support, in 2002 and 2003, we received additional dollars to hire more border agents. And I think that's a good sign. We're not quite to the level that Congress wants to be and in the 2004 budget, I suspect we'll get the additional dollars to get the force level that they've directed. It's a phase-in addition. But again, more agents, better security, more technology. You know, we do get stronger and safer every day and every year.

Q: From where, though?

SECRETARY RIDGE: Right now, it would be a repositioning of the assets and the people that we have. We've just got to reposition some of the folks from different -- we just have some people that -- additional people we want to put up on the northern border and we let Commissioner Bonner make the decision as to where he can make those changes without diminishing security elsewhere.

Q: Mr. Secretary, should the American people be prepared to remain at code orange and at this heightened threat of alert for a lengthier period than in the past? And is this --

SECRETARY RIDGE: Again, I remind everyone as respectfully as I can that the level of alert, the national warning system is based upon the threat. It was the universal opinion of the coordinated intelligence committee that the threat occasioned us -- the threat level should be raised to orange. And again, the same kind of assessment will be ongoing and undoubtedly there will come a time when that same community that

made the recommendation that we raise the level of orange -- which means we do more things to protect ourselves, we do more things to strengthen ourselves, there will come a time when they look at it and say, we don't have to do that much, we can go back down to a lesser level of protection. But I think it's very important to remind folks, even when we're at yellow, an elevated level of risk, this country is substantially safer and doing more to protect itself than it was on September 10th, 2003.

I guess one of the final observations I would make -- and I know you didn't ask for the monologue at the end of the press conference, and I apologize for this, but I think it's very important and you write about it and report on it and you'll continue to probe and they'll be continuing -- the GAO will continue to say, well, you need to do more here, and Congress will very appropriately say you need to do more there. That's a part of the responsibility of the new Department of Homeland Security, it's part of the President's commitment to continue to build strength and security and safety into our country. And Liberty Shield is, I think, a rather dramatic example where we took the President's idea of a national strategy -- it was not just the federal government but we're involved with the state and local governments and we're involved with the private sector to do things to make us safer, to do things to prevent a terrorist attack.

And again, I think Liberty Shield is the first and, to date, the most dramatic example of the new Department of Homeland Security working with our national partners, state and local government and the private sector, to do just that. We will continue to build on that in the future. Thank you very much.

11:01 A.M. EST

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