

# Press Release

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Contact: DHS Public Liaison, John  
Barsa, Director (202) 282-9117 or  
Kathy Prendergast (202) 282-9118

## **TRANSCRIPT OF SECRETARY OF HOMELAND SECURITY TOM RIDGE AT PRESS CONFERENCE**

WASHINGTON - **SECRETARY RIDGE:** Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Earlier today, I submitted a formal letter of resignation to the President, and with his concurrence it is my desire to continue to serve as Secretary of Homeland Security through February 1st of next year unless my successor is confirmed by the Senate earlier.

It was, obviously, a very difficult decision, but a decision that I was pleased to be able to communicate in a personal way with my leadership team earlier today as well. We have 40 or 50 of the most incredible Americans who have been an integral part of the leadership team of this Department from all walks of life that are on a two-day, off-site session as we look at some budget matters and we do some strategic planning for the next five years, and I was also able to communicate by e-mail to the 180,000 men and women with whom I've been privileged to work for nearly two years.

I think we have accomplished a great deal in a short period of time. As I've said to the President, there will always be more work for us to do in Homeland Security, but if you take a look at many of the innovations, the improvements to security, the enhancements to safety at ports of entry, the partnerships that we've developed with the state and locals and the private sector, just all in all, I think it's a reflection of the commitment and the dedication and the energy and the professionalism, really the combined power of about 180,000 people strong.

I know I've said to many of my co-workers, not only in Washington but around the country during my tenure as their Secretary, that on a day-to-day basis one could say that individual decisions that these men and women make out there at Ports of Entry have as much to do with the security of the country as any individual decisions we might make here at headquarters. As I've said to you many times before, we have to be right a billion-plus times a year, meaning we have to make literally hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of decisions every year, or every day, and the terrorists only have to be right once.

The President has given me an extraordinary opportunity to serve my country in this incredible period since September 11th, 2001. I will always be grateful for his call to

service. I will always be grateful for the opportunity to serve my country with this President as its leader.

Thank you.

**QUESTION:** Secretary Ridge, since you're the first person to have this job as Secretary of the Homeland Security Department, what would you say to your successor about how demanding a job it is? From the first moment you get up until you go to bed at night, is it just exhausting?

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** Well, it's no more exhausting than the work that I think most of my cohorts do in headquarters around the country. I mean, there is a very specific job to do. There are many dimensions to the job. You have to be prepared to work, like literally hundreds of thousands of people who work for government and elsewhere work. You have to work as long as it takes to get the job done on a day-to-day basis.

And I think I would say to my successor that the opportunity to continue on a day-by-day basis to make your country safer and more secure, within the constitutional framework, is an enormous challenge and a great opportunity for leadership, and to engage, frankly, our partners not only within the federal government but at the state level, the local level and in our international partners as well.

Homeland Security has never been to me just a Department. It's about the integration of a country and taking the resources and the capabilities and the capacities we have in the federal government, the state level, the local level, the private sector, the academic community, you name it, and making sure that they are all engaged in a fundamental way, in a certain way that collectively that we, as a country, are safer and more secure.

So I would tell my successor you've got a phenomenal job in an extraordinary time and you can do it -- hopefully you can go to work every day and enjoy it as much as I did.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Secretary Ridge, can you talk a little bit about your future, what's next for you, the private sector, government? And can you walk us through your decision? Why leave?

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** Well, first of all, I'm just going to step back after 22-plus years of public service in a row, to step back a little bit, breathe deeply and then decide. So I can't go down that path very far with you, so I'll just have to --

**QUESTION:** Can you walk through your decision now, why leave?

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** Well, I think I can. And, basically, it just comes down to some things I have been postponing for years and years and years. I said I wanted to raise some personal and family matters to a slightly higher priority. And it's not unique to me.

I mean anybody in public service. And anybody -- I don't care whether you're wearing a military uniform or you're engaged in a non-military way in public service at the state, local, federal level -- the whole family puts the public service uniform on. And when you are working at this level on these kinds of critical issues -- and again, it's not unique to me -- but, you know, there are opportunities that you may have planned with your family, occasions to be with the family that you miss.

I mean, when I was governor I had a chance to have a little bit slightly -- manage my schedule a bit differently and actually coach my daughter's softball team for several years. That's just not something I'd be available to do now, but I do like to -- I am looking forward to going to my son's rugby games. You know, so, there's just a lot of things out there on a personal level that I just would like to take -- have a little bit more time to do.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Would you consider another Cabinet job?

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** Well, everybody knows I love public service. I mean, I did it for 22 years. But I just want to step back and pay a little more attention to some other personal matters.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary, you have said frequently that you've accomplished a lot, but there is still more to be done.

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** Sure.

**QUESTION:** I know that there are important issues pending with regard to biometrics, with U.S.-VISIT.

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** Right.

**QUESTION:** You have problems still combining ICE and CBP people. They're at each other's throats. But I wonder if you can tell us what is your single biggest disappointment? What is the one thing that you thought would be easier and you have not been able to accomplish? What surprising disappointment you may have encountered?

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** Well, first of all, I want to go back to a couple aspects of the question, if I might. First of all, one of the things I have had the opportunity to do as Secretary is see what America has done in response to 9/11, and particularly to see what my coworkers are doing. And admittedly, one of the initial challenges when we inherited the legacy of Customs and INS was to merge different -- merge these units.

And by and large, while admittedly, change is always difficult, there have been significant changes that have occurred that frankly have made us safer and more effective and give us a surge capacity at our Ports of Entry, and the like.

And I don't think in a Department where we've had to move so quickly and change so rapidly, the notion that there might be some people out there that are still a little uncomfortable with it is not surprising to me, but we continue to work our way through whatever these irritants are to give people the comfort level so they're more worried about securing the country rather than job security. I think we've done a pretty good job in that regard.

I haven't been disappointed a single day I've been Secretary. However, there have been days -- let me put a little more thought -- I like going to work every day. There are certain days I've just enjoyed even more. I guess there is a -- as I look back on nearly two-plus years, while there are no disappointments, there are certain things I wish we could have probably accomplished a little bit earlier.

**QUESTION:** Like what?

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** Well, I mean, there is enormous international dimension to securing the homeland, and we have been very aggressive over the past year but there was a year there where I wish we would have initiated the discussions on a bilateral basis or worked with the European Union. We're in the process of building our team, I understand that, but much of what we do, as it affects our borders, involves the engagement and the agreement of our allies around the world.

What I have discovered is that when we sit down, make our case, discuss, negotiate finding a common solution of mutual benefit, we've made a lot of progress. Part of me wishes we'd have started a little bit earlier, but there were other things that it seemed at the time were higher priorities.

So, you know, just some days where we've made -- felt a greater sense of achievement or progress than other days. But by and large, there have been no disappointments. Probably a few things I would like to have done differently within the organization, some of the things we're changing now, but all in a matter of merging 22 different units and departments, 180,000 people, you can't expect to get it your way, the right way, the first time.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary, one of the things that you have done that the public is probably going to remember is the color-coded threat system that you instituted, and there continues to this day to be a lot of debate about whether that system actually does what it's supposed to do.

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** Right.

**QUESTION:** So as you get ready to sort of step back now, do you feel that that is the right way to go about, you know, doing that, or do you think that there might be a better way you think a successor should, you know, think about?

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** Well, first of all, that is a system that quite a few people worked on, labored over for months and months when I was in the White House, and we took a look at the other systems that existed around the world. We took a look at what Department of Defense does and the Department of the State does, and we certainly took a look at the system, or the non-system, that we used for the first couple times when the Director of the FBI, the Attorney General and I went out and basically said, "America, we think the threat level is higher." I mean, so you either have the system we have, we took a look at the some of the systems elsewhere around the world, or the non-system that nobody was happy with, including the individuals -- primarily me -- was out there making -- talking very appropriately with the public.

I think this Homeland Security Advisory System has been refined and matured to the point where it serves two purposes: one, it is just a general signal to America generally that a majority -- there's a consensus within the President's Homeland Security Council that the threat tomorrow is greater than the threat today; and secondly, it is a signal to the security and law enforcement professionals around the country they have to ramp up security.

It has demonstrated, I think, its maturity in the sense that we have raised the threshold because, number one, we haven't raised it nationally for almost a year -- (knocks on wood) -- we hope we can continue that because the last time we raised it was during the last holiday season, which we're approaching; and secondly, this year we're able, because the information drove us to apply it in a very selective, surgical way, in a very defined part of our economy in very specific regions.

So I think it's a good system. We're always looking for ways to make it better. But, frankly, if there's one agency that errs on the side of divulging more, not less, information to the public with regard to the threat, I think that's something that we take pride in. I mean, I think America is prepared to deal with the reality in the post-9/11 world. I think it's in our best long-term interest to share more information with Americans about the potential threat rather than less, and hopefully my successor will err on that side of sharing more, rather than less, info.

Yes, sir.

**QUESTION:** Do you have any plans to go back to Pennsylvania no matter what you do in the future?

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** No, no. Well, first of all, I'll be around here for a while because I've moved my son out of -- my family around a couple times over the past three years and he still has a couple years left in town, so we're here for a while.

You know, I had a difficult time talking to my leadership this morning, I must tell you, because they're an incredible group of people. I mean, you know many of them. Some are retired military that just the call of public service -- as one individual told me, we're at war again; I've got to come in and help. There are other people who are active military but decided to come in. We've got people from all over the private sector come in. We have moms and dads with young children that still give us 12, 14, 16 hours a day. We've got somebody -- we've got a young woman who's a very talented person who works full-time with us, going to law school at night. I mean, we've got an incredible group of people who just stay until the job is done.

So I told them this morning that next to that discussion, you know, when I called my family in on a very short notice in September of '01 and said, by the way, we're going to leave the governor's residence and we're going to move into a little apartment and I'm going to commute for the next year because the President asked me to come to Washington, D.C., to serve in response, be part of a national effort, part of his administration-wide effort to make our homeland more secure and safer, so that's exactly what I did and I'm grateful for the opportunity.

**QUESTION:** How long ago did you make your own personal decision that you were going to leave now?

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** I started thinking much more seriously about it around election time in November, after the election. I thought about it a little bit before, but serious thought as to when and under what circumstances, after the President was reelected.

Pete.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary, can you say with confidence that measures taken by the Department of Homeland Security have actually prevented attacks? And in how many cases do you think that's true? How many times?

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** One of those questions that I could give you a very confident answer and you'd say, "Prove it," and I'd be -- it'd be difficult to prove what I can't necessarily quantify.

But I am confident that the terrorists are aware that from the curb to the cockpit we've got additional security measures that didn't exist a couple years ago, that from port to port we do things differently with maritime security. I'm confident they know that the borders are more secure. I'm confident that they know that we've developed and are sharing information with the state and local law enforcement. I'm confident that they've basically, through their own view of what we've done, that they know America is a different place to work and operate in. I'm also confident that, based on what detainees have told us, that if you increase your security and your vigilance, that's a deterrent.

Can I tell you today there are X number of incidents that we were able to thwart or prevent? Cannot. Am I fairly confident, confident that we probably have? Yes, I am, but it's still difficult to prove something unless I could point to a specific case.

**MR. ROEHRKASSE:** Time for one more.

**QUESTION:** Mr. Secretary --

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** But we know -- I mean, we've seen what other friends, what other folks in the administration have done in taking down cells around the country.

**QUESTION:** Do you feel you've made any headway with the private sector in getting them to take up the burden of protecting the nation's infrastructure, given that they own so much of it?

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** I think we've made great progress with the private sector under the work and through the work of our Information, Analysis and Infrastructure Protection Unit. You know, that's a new piece of the Department. We merged a lot of old and traditional legacy departments, but this is a new responsibility, a strategic piece.

We have done several things. We have developed a formal means of communication to every sector of our economy and we're in frequent communication, almost daily communication, with one or all of them. We've made great progress across the board in developing a business case so that the kind of investment we expect them to make is viewed as precisely that, not as an expense, but as an investment that has a return that is - you can justify to the shareholders.

I think by engaging them on best practices in terms of securing, whether it's a chemical facility, telecommunications site, and the like, and taking advantage of their professional expertise as we go about setting standards for security has been very successful to date.

Make no mistake about it, there are more sites to be secured and we will need to continue to engage the private sector and they will need to accept the responsibility to continue to invest more, but to date, they have been very responsive. They have partnered with us on many -- in many occasions, and they've continued to -- they have made considerable investments. But they're not done yet either, and my successor will continue to promote their continued investment in securing some of this critical infrastructure that fortunately is a condition of the world's largest and most diverse and most successful economy.

Yes.

**QUESTION:** Did you meet with the President to discuss your going?

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** Well, the President and I have had --any conversations I've had with the President in the past, or will have, will always be private.

**QUESTION:** Thank you.

**SECRETARY RIDGE:** All right. Okay. Thanks very much.

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