



Remarks by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and British Home Secretary Jacqui Smith at a Press Availability Following a Private Meeting on Bilateral Agenda

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Secretary Chertoff: Good morning, everybody. I'm joined by the Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, who's over for a brief visit to the United States. We're throwing out the welcome mat here. I wish I could make the weather a little bit warmer, but at least it's dry.

As you know, we've had a remarkably close and longstanding relationship in the area of homeland security with our counterparts in the British government, in particularly with the Home Office, which is the principal counterpart for this department. I've had an opportunity to meet with Home Secretary Smith on a number of occasions, and we've been able to cover a wide range of discussions about activities that we are pursuing in common interests that, of course, are very central to the concerns of citizens of both countries. We want to keep our countries secure, free and prosperous, and we find that we have an excellent partnership.

So I will allow – perhaps if the Home Secretary wants to make a few remarks, and then we'll take some questions.

Secretary Smith: Well, Secretary Chertoff, thank you very much. It certainly has been a very warm welcome, and it continues the very excellent relationship, both personally and importantly between our countries, as Secretary Chertoff says, recognizing the challenge of maintaining the security of our people in the face of what is a serious threat from terrorism.

We've been able, today, to share the work that we're doing. I've been able to talk to Secretary Chertoff about the focus that we're placing in the United Kingdom on how we counter the immediate threat from terrorism, and also how we actually work together in the longer term to deter people from turning to violent extremism and supporting terrorism in the first place. And that has been, I think, a very useful both exchange of ideas and a range of areas where we'll be able to work together in the future.

Our citizens are stronger because of the work that we do together, and I very much welcome that relationship in the way we've been able to take it forward today.

Question: I wanted to know if – you recently made an agreement with the EU on airline passenger (inaudible) information. I'm wondering, are you satisfied with the amount of information you're getting from the EU, or do you want to get additional information?

Secretary Chertoff: Well, we did reach an agreement with the EU last year on Passenger Name Record information. We're satisfied with the way that's working. It's actually an outstanding program, and I believe that the EU is now going to be seeking to adopt a similar program for people coming into the EU.

Obviously, of course, it's not the only way in which we are interested in vetting people who come into the United States. Under the Visa Waiver legislation, which Congress passed, again, late last year, we will be getting electronic travel authorization at some point later this year, which is an online system for people to register if they want to come to the United States. It probably won't be more than a few minutes on the computer, but that will be an additional way in which we can do the vetting that we need to do.

Question: Could I ask you, are you seeking information from passengers overflying the United States that come from the U.K.? And if I could ask the Home Secretary (inaudible).

Secretary Chertoff: This is a separate – let me make sure we don't mix apples and oranges. The issue of information for people who are overflying has nothing to do with the Visa Waiver Program. Under the Chicago Convention, which I think goes back almost 50 years, anybody who wants to come into the airspace of a country has to submit to the rules and regulations of the country whose airspace they're entering, whether it's to land or to overfly.

We generally require, and will require, under a program called Secure Flight: name, passport number, and maybe one or two other items of information from the manifest of anybody who is going to overfly the United States – and that's pursuant to this international arrangement. It's very similar, the information, that's furnished under passport when you land, so it's only two or three items of information.

Secretary Smith: I've been able to talk to Secretary Chertoff today about the importance of the Visa Waiver Program for the very strong relationship that there is between the U.K. and the U.S., the importance of that for travelers, both on business and on visits. We're clear and agreed that it is very possible to maintain that ability for people to travel, whilst at the same time keeping up and, in fact, building on the very close relationship that we have in sharing information, in ensuring that we're working together to develop the strongest security around travel between our countries. And, you know, I'm very confident that we're going to be able to deliver both of those things.

Question: I'd like to hear from both of you on this. The Defense Department today is expected to announce it's seeking the death penalty for some 9/11 conspirators at Gitmo. Might this announcement lead to some retaliatory acts by al Qaeda or their sympathizers? Did the DOD consult with you on their decision? And what, if any additional actions, over and above what you ordinarily do, are you doing to protect the country from any type of retaliatory attacks?

Secretary Chertoff: Well, first of all, what you're talking about hasn't been announced yet.

Secondly, when it comes to the question of whether anything that we do is going to cause al Qaeda to retaliate, they have, up until now, never shown any restraint at all, in terms of the barbarism of what they will do. Therefore, I'm hard-pressed to imagine anything we're going to do is going to inspire them to exceed what they've already done – namely, killing 3,000 Americans on September 11th.

Third, the issue of how the process of adjudicating military commissions proceeds is a legal issue. The Department of Defense obviously controls that. I presume that they're consulting with the Department of Justice. This department really does not play a role in that.

Question: If I can ask you, as well, if this is a concern to you. If the U.S. pursues the death penalty against al Qaeda conspirators, 9/11 conspirators, does that sort of raise the threat to the U.K.?

Secretary Smith: Well, I think Secretary Chertoff has made the specific position very clear, including the legal position. He's also made clear, and I agree with him, the threat from al Qaeda regardless of any grievances that may or may not be adduced in support of that. The important thing, I think, about our meeting today has been the work that we have done in order to be able to minimize that threat for our citizens, and to be able to prevent its salience in the future with anybody else who might be attracted to respond to it. And that's been very much the emphasis of our meeting today.

Question: Secretary Chertoff has said in a lot of interviews that he's very concerned, if not most concerned, about Europe as either a target of terrorism, or a platform for terrorists to attack the United States. What can you tell us about the platform side of that, in terms of your efforts to find people who maybe using Visa Waiver – or want to seek to use the Visa Waiver Program to get into the United States to attack the U.S.?

Secretary Smith: Well, I've been able to talk to Secretary Chertoff today about the considerable work that we're undertaking in the U.K., in terms of reorganizing our government response to counter-terror; in terms of the extra resource that we're putting into tackling the immediate threat; in terms of the work that we're doing over the longer term to be able to actually prevent people turning to violent extremism.

We haven't today, but on other occasions, we've been able to talk about the strengthened border work that we're doing in the U.K., and particularly the development, for example, of our e-Borders project, which will give us a much clearer idea and information about those traveling into and out of the U.K.

All of that work combined, I think, is the effective, broad strategic way in which we're going to counter the threat from terror, whether or not it's within the U.K., or whether or not that's an international threat.

Question: Do you agree that Europe is, in terms of being a platform, the greatest threat to the United States?

Secretary Smith: Well, what I agree with is that the United States and the U.K. and across Europe, we face a serious threat from terrorism. That is why our close working relationship and the experiences that we've been able to share today, and the work that we'll be able to take forward, are the most effective way in which together we'll be able to counter that threat. Whether or not it's something that is on any of our individual home grounds, or whether or not that's something that would be of a threat to our allies, the important point here is, you know, what is a threat to the U.S. is also a threat to the U.K., and vice versa, and that's why our relationship is so close.

Question: Secretary Chertoff, last year, you took conditional acceptance of Project 28, the 28-mile border. I understand that you went there last week. Did you see the type of improvement that you think will lead to the quick approval of unconditional acceptance, the full acceptance, of that project or there's still significant problems there?

Secretary Chertoff: I don't think I'm, at this moment, going to announce the final disposition, but I will say I went down and I spent a fair amount of time not only looking at it, but talking to the line agents. I think that this system is working well as a, what I would call, first generation 1.0 project. I think a lot has been learned about what needs to go into 2.0, or maybe 1.5, and we're going to continue to move along the lines of what they call spiral development to improve the system.

But I want to emphasize that from the very beginning, we have taken the position that this is not a one-size-fits-all approach to border security. The particular project, P-28, which covers 28 miles in a very sophisticated network, works well in some areas. In some areas, we may wind up using ground-based radar, what we call mobile surveillance systems, and we hope to have over 40 of those by the end of this year. In other areas, we use fencing, or, for example, we have literally a levee wall that we've just agreed to build in parts of Texas.

So this is very much of a pragmatic, utility-driven and operator-driven strategy, in which all of these tools, I envision, would be very good across the border.

Question: Does that type of levee more heartened or disheartened by the (inaudible)?

Secretary Chertoff: No, I was heartened by it. I mean, I think we looked at the – I actually saw a group intercepted. We've actually had operational value come out of the system – people being detected and apprehended. I actually saw it with my own eyes.

Now, there are some things I want to see changed in it. In some ways, we may want to simplify some things at the next generation, or we may want to expand certain capabilities in the next generation. But I walked away heartened, and that was being a pretty skeptical consumer, in my attitude.

Question: (Inaudible) – at any point over the summer when these attacks occurred, or potential attacks, were you surprised that doctors were involved in the final execution (inaudible)?

Secretary Smith: I don't think it's an element of surprise because one of the things that I think is very important, and that we've been very clear about, is that there is a – that we have, actually, a much better handle now on the growing scale, the growing nature, the complexity, of the sorts of terrorist plots that we're confronted with in the U.K.

And that's precisely the reason why we have already taken action, both through increased resourcing for our police and our investigators, through the way in which we brought together the approach to policy in the strategic control of counterterrorism policy in the U.K.

So I feel confident that whilst we do have a serious and sustained threat from terrorism, we're also taking the action both domestically and in relation to extremely important partners like the U.S., to enable us to challenge that both in the short term, in terms of the arrests and the successful foiling of plots that we've seen, and in the longer term in terms of preventing people from turning to terrorism in the first place.

Question: When there have been plots in the U.K. that have been foiled or uncovered, often people like me rely on people within the government to give us information about what happened. But I was wondering, what is the effect of those leaks on the prosecution of terrorism cases in the U.K., in terms of past plots, where plots have been uncovered and there were leaks in the U.S. to the news. What has been the impact on the prosecution in the U.K.?

Secretary Smith: Well, I'm sure all of us are very aware that we need to achieve successful prosecutions, and we'll be careful about the information that is communicated. And we've had successful prosecutions. I mean, last year in the U.K. alone, we've convicted 42 people on terrorist offenses; 21 of those, incidentally, pleading guilty. This year alone, we've seen 11 convictions for terrorist offenses, including the first-ever conviction for a new offense of preparing for terrorism.

So yes, of course, we –

Question: So the leaks aren't a problem.

Secretary Smith: No, of course – you're not going to get me to say that leaks are a good thing – and they're not – but we have been successful in our prosecution of terrorists, and we will continue to focus on that.

Secretary Chertoff: But I will say, leaks are bad.

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