

Remarks by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff at the Secure Borders Open Doors Advisory Committee Meeting

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Thank you, Jared. I did have an opportunity to glance at the report, although I haven't read it yet, but I'm looking forward to looking at it a little more closely later this week. And I do appreciate the fact that the Homeland Security Advisory Council has approved the report.

I want to thank you, and I want to thank John for, and the whole committee for some very good work on a very important issue, which is how we balance our security needs with a desire to continue to make this country an attractive place for people to come visit and conduct business in. And I'm going to have some of our senior officials work to implement the proposals on these recommendations.

We have made a lot of progress to date on the goals which we articulated in the initiative which Secretary Rice and I outlined over a year ago. We have, for example, made progress on our model ports of entry at Dulles Airport and Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston. In partnership with Walt Disney parks and resorts, we have a new welcoming video, which I had an opportunity to see at Dulles in the last few weeks. It has good music, too. And apparently it's gotten a warm reception, which I think is a positive sign.

I understand that commerce figures suggest that our international travel is up across the board over the last year, which is also good news; a 13 percent increase as of September 2007, as compared to September 2006, with the third strong quarter being the strongest of the year – and I think that's very good news.

Among the increases are increases in visits from Canada and Mexico, as well as overseas arrivals excluding Canada and Mexico, which were up 11 percent over September 2006. Visitors from Western Europe were up 12 percent, and from Eastern Europe 9 percent, and South America 26 percent. So that's all good news. That suggests that we are getting people in increasing numbers to come to the United States. I'd like to claim some credit for that. I suspect the condition of the dollar has something to do with that. And I will say no more about that topic.

We are moving forward in a number of security improvements. One, of course, that we're very happy about is the reform of the Visa Waiver Program, which we got Congress to pass last year. That's going to give us the capability to start to include some additional countries in the visa waiver country, hopefully some in Eastern Europe and other parts of the world. And yet we're doing it in a way that increases our security through the Electronic Travel Authorization Program, which I'm happy to say, because we had an appropriation late last year, we are now able to move forward on and get underway.

We are also now collecting 10 fingerprints under US-VISIT. I saw that at Dulles. It literally adds no more time to the process than under the current two-fingerprint system, but it adds tremendous value in terms of our ability to match fingerprints against the latent prints of people that might be a threat to this country. And so that's an easy and efficient way.

I might say that – you know, when I was at Dulles a few weeks ago, it's really remarkable to see how much progress we have made in putting up reasonable, efficient security measures at our ports of entry, as compared to where we were prior to 9/11.

Here is what we now have – and this all takes place within a matter of moments, unless of course someone has a problem, in which case reasonably it should take a little bit longer. But for the vast majority of people, you show up, you present your passport, it's swiped. We immediately compare it to a database. You could put your 10 fingerprints down; we immediately compare that to a database. You're asked a few questions. We look at your visa if you're coming from a visa country.

The whole thing is painless. It takes place literally within a matter of minutes, and yet we have managed to put a number of important measures into place over that very short period of time. We've checked your biometrics, we've checked your photo, we've checked to make sure you haven't previously come in under a different name, we've checked to make sure you're not ineligible to come in for any one of a number of prescribed reasons, we've had an opportunity to talk to you to get a sense of whether you're telling us the truth or not.

All of these are exactly what I think the public expects us to put into place over the next five or six years. And while I can't say it's going to make it impossible for a terrorist or a dangerous person to get in, we've made it very much harder, and that's very good news.

The one other thing I would say in this open session is, as you know, on January 31st of this year, we will be making some changes at the land border. Now, last year, we did transition to air Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative; the requirement that everybody arriving by air in the Western Hemisphere come with a passport. I'm delighted to say that we've had basically 99 percent compliance or better since this was launched. The bottom line is, people get this; they understand it, they've equipped themselves to travel. It does not seem to have caused a tremendous burden.

As you also know, Congress has mandated a delay of the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative full implementation until June of 2009. But we are, nevertheless, in the intervening time taking some reasonable and very important measures to eliminate what I consider to be unacceptable vulnerabilities in our land border. And that includes eliminating oral declarations in all but extraordinary circumstances, and reducing the number of documents that will be accepted at the border, although we will still accept many of the documents that are currently available. We are not implementing WHTI, but we are certainly rationalizing the existing system.

And let me take a couple of moments to tell you why this is important. It would shock, amaze, and probably dismay a lot of Americans to learn that it has been customary over the years to allow a significant number of people to enter the United States from Mexico or Canada simply by saying, "I'm an American citizen," and then getting waived through.

I have to say that nothing I've seen about the way the world is these days, or the state of our illegal immigration, leads me to believe that the honor system is one that works well at the border. And this is something the GAO just criticized in the last few days. So I do think it's appropriate that we take some effective and reasonable measures to close this up. And therefore, as of after January 31, other than in extraordinary circumstances, we will be requiring some documentation. Oral declarations will not, except in unusual cases, be acceptable.

The second thing we've done is we've looked at the 8,000 kinds of documents that have been presented to our border officials as a way to get into the country – library cards, baptismal certificates. I mean, again, in a world in which I think the public is rightly concerned about, for example, illegal immigration and people sneaking through between the ports of entry, it's crazy to build a fence between a port of entry and then open the door at the port of entry for anybody to walk in on their own say-so. So we've got to tighten that up a little bit, too.

We're going to need everybody's cooperation. This is about messaging. The documents that we're accepting after January 31 are readily available. It's things like your driver's license and your birth certificate, so there's not going to be a problem of getting the documents out there. But we just need to

be clear with people. And of course we're always tolerant when there's confusion, and we do work out circumstances, particularly in the early stages of a new program. But I think we owe the public a disciplined movement in the direction of secure borders in a way that doesn't interfere with open doors.

So I think this is a good news story. And I think the increases that we have seen in travel suggest that we are moving in the right direction.

The last thing I would say, which I think you will welcome, is that we did get money for fiscal year '08, finally, to add several hundred additional border inspectors. That will help us move to making sure we fully man our border inspection posts when we have – particularly have a high volume of traffic. I know there's nothing more frustrating than to arrive at a port of entry and see a number of unoccupied booths while the line is long.

Some things we can't do anything about. Some of the infrastructure at the airports and the land ports of entry is old and needs to be reconfigured and re-engineered. But at least where we do have the infrastructure, we ought to support it with the personnel, and we're going to move as rapidly as possible to get people trained and deployed so we can make these easier and more welcoming for travelers. Thank you.

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