

Hearing before the House Committee on Homeland Security
“20 Years After 9/11: The State of the Transportation Security Administration”
September 29, 2021

TESTIMONY OF

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Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Katko and Distinguished Members of the Committee. Thank you for inviting me here today to add my thoughts to those of my former colleagues as we recognize the 20th anniversary of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and reflect upon the unique value and critically important service it provides to our Nation.

One of greatest privileges of my career was to have had the honor of serving with the women and men of the TSA. They are among the most dedicated, professional, and selfless public servants I have known, and our Nation is safer and more secure because of their work. I remain grateful for their service.

Most Americans know TSA as the agency responsible for aviation security. But as this Committee well knows, TSA’s missions are many and encompass the full spectrum of our Nation’s transportation system – aviation, maritime, mass transit, passenger and freight rail, over the road motor carriers, interstate pipelines and more. It is a dynamic mission set that is extraordinarily complex, comprehensive, and challenging, made ever more so by a continually evolving and expanding threat environment. And today’s threat environment is much more dynamic, diverse, and complex than the one faced when TSA came into being on November 19th, 2001.

The transportation network underpins our Nation’s economic health. It enables reliable access to materials and markets and the ability to take advantage of economies of scale and production. Transportation is central to our economic prosperity and resilience, and transportation security is a key component of our national security. We’ve lived through devastating impacts to our lives and economy when transportation systems have been disrupted or compromised. Indeed, as we meet here today, our supply chains face severe challenges in part due to the transportation disruptions of the global COVID pandemic.

Our current approach to transportation security is a direct outgrowth of the tragic attacks of September 11, 2001 – the 20th anniversary of which we sadly commemorated by remembering those we lost and honoring the heroes who responded. Transportation provided the weapon of 9/11 and was central to Al-Qaeda’s strategy that day. Transportation offered the means and the instruments for terrorists to strike at America. Transportation also provided the mechanism for the 19 hijackers to travel and coordinate their plot.

My colleagues on this panel have recounted the history of our collective actions and successes in the two decades following that tragic event and have specifically highlighted the many accomplishments of TSA to date and suggested approaches for the future. They have also

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described in chilling detail the challenging and diverse array of new threats facing our Nation. Building upon this, I will focus my comments on transportation security looking forward.

The robust and capable security architecture we have built over the past 20 years has arguably made us safer and more secure from terrorist attacks. We have developed more capable systems and technologies, integrated and shared intelligence among stakeholders, designed processes and procedures for vetting people who access or work in critical areas, and developed tactics and techniques to prevent large scale attacks like 9/11 from happening again. We have become exceptionally adept at instituting countermeasures to the terrorist tactics we have seen and experienced. Such countermeasures are essential. Security is necessarily additive, as terrorists and criminals have not been known to remove a tool from their kit.

However, a security system that is primarily reactive is a security system that can, and will, eventually fail. Adversaries are agile, adaptive, aggressive, and creative. Our approaches to security must be even more so. Effective and capable security systems are dynamic and ever evolving. There is no perfect system nor ideal technology and no “we got it right” moment. Success demands security systems and technologies that anticipate and predict – systems that are creative, adaptive, and innovative, and that focus on imagining what might happen in addition to protecting against what has happened.

Imagining what might happen is key, as the transportation threat picture presents in a multitude of new and ever-changing configurations and pathways. Terrorists and criminals are dangerous entrepreneurs searching for advantage. In addition to the ongoing, persistent threat from direct attacks, we are subject to growing array of new perils and concerns. These include increasingly sinister and sophisticated cyber actors; the shock and lessons of a global pandemic and its impact on global transportation; vulnerabilities presented by our reliance on increasingly interconnected industrial control systems; and the growing sophistication and deployment (and inherent vulnerabilities) of technologies such as unmanned systems and autonomous vehicles.

Moreover, the barriers to entry for those who would attack or harm continue to lower, especially with respect to cyber threats. The Colonial Pipeline ransomware attack and the hacking of a major U.S. maritime port just last week dramatically illustrate the ease with which our critical infrastructure can be attacked and disabled by remote cyber actors.

For these reasons and more, the transportation security systems of today cannot be the transportation security systems of tomorrow. Today’s state-of-the-art systems, as good as they may be, will not be sufficient to meet tomorrow’s threats. We need the resolve and courage to dedicate the resources and build the integrated systems necessary to imagine the next threats and continually refresh and refine our training, technologies and processes to evolve faster than the threats we foresee.

Administrator Pekoske has presented a compelling strategy and persuasive argument for increasing investment in the TSA workforce and in continually evolving, improving, and modernizing TSA’s systems and architecture. But this strategy requires predictable and reliable funding and support to succeed. For example, the TSA Innovation Task Force and the TSA

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office of requirements and capabilities are working hard to imagine future threats and innovate faster than our adversaries. They are rapidly developing, testing, and deploying systems and processes to front line operators to counter the threats of the future. I urge this Committee and Congress to fully fund TSA’s strategy roadmap along with programs such as these that encourage rapid innovation, provide for continuous technology improvements and deployment, and give the workforce the tools and training they need.

I also urge you to support efforts to further mature research and development efforts across the DHS enterprise. Coordinated, ongoing, operationally focused, and integrated research and development across DHS can provide TSA and other agencies with the capabilities they need to counter the complexity and diversity of evolving threats, foreign and domestic. Such work should be linked to intelligence assessments and a detailed requirements and capabilities development process with robust private sector engagement, input from partners and stakeholders, open architecture standards, and acquisition strategies and processes that promote rapid deployment of new technologies across the full spectrum of the mission set.

Security is a never-ending race, and we need to stay in the lead.

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Katko, and members of the Committee, thank you again for this chance to share my thoughts as we mark TSA’s 20th anniversary. Thank you for your continued support of the TSA and its dedicated workforce. I look forward to any questions you may have.