



**One Hundred Eleventh Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20515**

January 8, 2010

President Barack Obama
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama:

Like you, I am extremely troubled by the system-wide failures surrounding the December 25th terrorist attack initiated on Northwest Flight 253.

I share your desire to attain answers to the questions surrounding the incident, including why critical homeland security information was not properly shared in the weeks leading up to the December 25, 2009 terrorist incident.

The results of the preliminary review you ordered are frank, informative and could provide a basis for critical security enhancements and process improvements. However, progress is unlikely if timely actions are not undertaken by the entire intelligence community, the Departments of Homeland Security and State and the Congress. To achieve success we must bring to bear sufficient resources and energy to tackle the longstanding and well-understood stovepipes in information sharing, enhance the watch list process, and strengthen all layers of our border security, including the visa-issuance process.

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, significant security and information sharing strides have resulted in a number of thwarted terrorist attacks. While most of these successes have been far from the public view, the high-profile arrests last year in Denver, Dallas, and New York certainly reflect your Administration's ongoing commitment to prevent and frustrate terrorist plots. Despite these successes, we cannot ignore the systemic failures that led to the Flight 253 terrorist attempt. This incident brings several major challenges into stark focus. Having concluded the preliminary phase of your review, I suspect you will agree that the following areas need immediate attention:

Information Sharing

Despite the creation of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence position, the establishment of the National Counterterrorism Center and myriad intelligence reforms that were implemented in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, information sharing continues to

be one of the most vexing national security challenges. This struggle predates your presidency but must be addressed if we are to, once and for all, cultivate an intelligence community that: (1) views our boots on the ground – from consular officers to Custom and Border Patrol Officers to Federal Air Marshals—as valuable contributors to the Intelligence Community; and (2) finally moves away from a culture of “need to know” to a culture of “need to share.”

Terrorist Watch List

The establishment of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) in 2004 represented a major milestone in our efforts to break down stovepipes between Federal agencies and identify individuals who potentially posed a threat to the nation. However, since that time, there have been a number of well-documented weaknesses in the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDES) database, the central repository that the NCTC maintains for the U.S. government’s watchlisting system. My committee alone has had a number of hearings exploring the problems associated with the “no fly list” utilized for security purposes. Our examinations have identified challenges associated with the initial collection of names on these lists, the timely aggregation and periodic revision of information contained on the lists, and the impact on travelers who are inaccurately identified against the no-fly list. As you work to refine the list and ensure that individuals who should be prevented access to commercial aviation, it is critical that sound intelligence drive the addition of names. Populating the list without such due diligence could serve to undermine the potential effectiveness of these lists and ultimately weaken one, crucial layer of a comprehensive security network.

Technology

One of the most dramatic areas of security enhancement since the deadly attacks of September 11, 2001 involves screening technology and protocols. Domestically, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has steadily sought new and better explosive detection technology to meet the ever-changing challenge of the terrorist threat. However, we have found that official avenues for testing and evaluation of emerging security technology are not sufficiently flexible to keep pace with this threat. If we are to address emerging threats in a forward-looking manner, the process of reviewing novel screening technologies must be reformed.

On the subject of technology, I would note that there seems to be renewed debate about whole body imaging technology, in the wake of the Christmas incident. Over the past few years, reaction to this technology has been mixed. While many view the imaging capabilities of this technology positively and believe it is technological solution to address the risk of a suicide terrorist concealing a device on his or her body, some have expressed extreme concern about the privacy implications of the mass deployment of these systems at TSA checkpoints. As you consider enhanced deployment of this and other promising technologies, I urge you to continue engaging the American public in a national discourse. This is one critical way to ensure that new technologies can be effectively deployed.

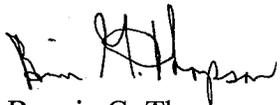
As you consider deploying new technologies, it is critical that each system is fully tested and certified well before major investments are made. Your predecessor's experience with explosive trace portals should serve as a cautionary tale. By the time that the plug was pulled on this ineffective screening technology, the Transportation Security Administration had expended nearly \$30 million.

Leadership Vacancies

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that the Flight 253 incident came at a time when there are vacancies at the head of U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the Transportation Security Administration and the Office of Intelligence and Analysis. Within the Department of Homeland Security, these components were at the epicenter of the attack. Swift Senate action on qualified candidates to fill these posts is essential to ensure that the lessons we learn from this incident translate into systemic reforms.

I look forward to working with you in the coming days to address these critical challenges and help make this nation more secure. As you well know, it is critical that we remain vigilant about the terrorist threat and do whatever it takes to defeat it.

Sincerely,



Bennie G. Thompson
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security