

Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

“Nomination of John Pistole to be Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security”

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
June 16, 2010

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I join the Chairman in welcoming John Pistole, the nominee to be Assistant Secretary for the Transportation Security Administration.

The attempted bombings on Christmas Day 2009 and just last month in Times Square remind us that terrorists remain committed to attacking our nation. TSA performs a critical role in protecting us from these attacks.

Following the Times Square bombing attempt, the suspect boarded a flight destined for the Middle East after his name was added to the No Fly list. This suspected terrorist was literally minutes away from escaping through a gap in our aviation security. At the time, airlines were required to update their “No Fly” lists only every 24 hours; TSA has now ordered that the lag time be reduced to two hours in response to this very incident.

But TSA could do more. Indeed, TSA should be directly responsible for comparing passenger names against the No Fly list. Currently, TSA performs this role only for domestic flights. Although TSA has said it will have Secure Flight implemented for all international flights by the end of 2010, the new leader of the TSA must ensure TSA meets that goal.

As demonstrated by the failed Christmas Day 2009 bombing attempt, our passenger checkpoint screening technology needs to constantly improve to thwart terrorists’ latest tactics. To that end, TSA plans to install 1,000 Advanced Imaging Technology (AIT) machines in U.S. airports by the end of Fiscal Year 2011. TSA announced its latest procurement of AITs last month, purchasing another 300 machines, which brings the total number purchased close to 500.

I know that DHS is also reviewing Automatic Target Recognition (ATR), the auto-detection software for AITs. ATR identifies potentially threatening objects on a person going through AIT screening and eliminates the need for a second TSA employee to review the passenger’s image in a separate room. This has the obvious benefits of addressing legitimate privacy concerns with this technology, reducing the space needed in airports to accommodate

AITs, and lowering the installation and operational costs to the government and, thus, to the taxpayers.

I observed the auto detection technology in action at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam earlier this year. Dutch security officials expressed confidence in the technology's ability to detect concealed explosives of the type used by the Christmas Day bomber. The next TSA Administrator should pursue this important advancement for the AIT program.

Because foreign governments must be our partners in improving aviation security, TSA also must continue its international outreach, which has accelerated in recent months. This should include increased information sharing with foreign governments and air carriers about individuals who warrant more scrutiny in the screening process and the deployment of advanced technology.

But aviation isn't the only sector of transportation that merits TSA's vigilant efforts. The agency's mission extends to other modes of transportation as well, including our mass transit system. We cannot focus all our resources on terrorist threats to aviation alone, as the threat does not stop there.

Mr. Pistole's nearly three decades of service with the FBI, including more than five years as Deputy Director, demonstrate significant law enforcement experience and leadership. He also has substantial experience in the management of law enforcement officers. If he is confirmed as the new TSA Administrator, these skills should serve him well in an agency that performs a law enforcement function.

I look forward to discussing these and other matters with Mr. Pistole today.

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