

Five Years Later -- September 2006

By: Congressman Mike Castle

It is hard to believe it was five years ago that terrorists used airliners as weapons and caused one of the greatest tragedies our country has ever faced, killing thousands of innocent Americans and challenging our homeland security. On this five year anniversary, I know each and every one of us is keeping in our thoughts and prayers the families and friends who lost loved ones on that clear September day. Our memories must sustain us through these difficult times.

In the wake of September 11th, we grew stronger as a nation, united by our determination to protect our homeland and to prevent such a horrific attack from every happening again. In Congress, we went to work; passing laws to bolster aviation security, strengthen our borders, and enhance our intelligence sharing capabilities.

Additionally, one of the critical lessons learned in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks is that we now live in a global community, where governments must cooperate and share information in order to ensure the security of their citizens. This was most evident recently in the coordinated effort by the United Kingdom and the United States in thwarting a terrorist plan to attack planes over the Atlantic. By sharing intelligence and communicating effectively, we were able to mobilize quickly to identify newly revealed air security vulnerabilities and prevent unthinkable disaster.

However, the threats of terrorism are wide-ranging, and while we are gradually improving our ability to detect and disrupt terrorist plots, it is essential that we continue to evolve our techniques and get to the point where we are thinking a few steps ahead of our enemies. This means improving security not only at airports, but also in several other critical areas:

- Rail and Transit Security - One major hole in our homeland security strategy is rail and transit security as evidenced by recent bombings in Madrid, London and India. These attacks are more than a wake-up call - they have become a clear blueprint for how our enemies may try to attack us next. I have fought to increase transit security by \$50 million this year and have introduced legislation to increase funding for security on subway systems, Amtrak trains, commuter lines, and freight rail cars by adding more police officers, canine units, communications systems, and security technology.

- Port Security - Clearly, another flaw in our national defense system is port security. This point was evident earlier this year when I joined many of my colleagues in calling into question plans to allow a foreign company to begin managing certain U.S. ports, without proper oversight. With thousands of shipping containers entering our country from all parts of the globe, our government must take steps to improve our ability to monitor cargo and make certain that only authorized personnel have access to our ports. For my part, I worked hard to convince the Department of Homeland Security to end its consistent inaction in implementing a secure identification system for port workers, resulting in the acceleration of the pioneering new TWIC program at all U.S. ports.

- Biometric Tracking Systems - Another lesson learned in the last five years is that terrorists are determined to exploit our nation's openness, including using our immigration system to illegally enter the U.S. Currently, we do not have the ability to adequately screen persons coming into our country and make certain their level of threat. For this reason, I have authored several pieces of legislation to increase the use of biometric tracking systems and equip all land borders with the US-VISIT entry/exit system. The 9/11 Commission underscored the importance of US-VISIT and I am determined to get this crucial system up and running effectively.

- Preparing First-Responders - Finally, it is imperative that we improve our level of preparedness by giving our nation's first responders the tools necessary to keep us safe. I have introduced legislation that would enable volunteer firefighters and EMS personnel to more readily respond to Presidentially-declared disasters like 9/11. I have also worked to increase

firefighter grants and to make certain that such funding goes where it is needed most, based on threat and vulnerability to attack.

As we look back and remember the victims of 9/11, it is also important that we honor our brave soldiers and first-responders, who have worked so hard to keep our country safe since September 11, 2001. While we are safer than we were five years ago, it is vital that we use this opportunity to be proactive and fix our current security problems before it is too late.

I dread the thought of a day when we are forced to look back with regret, wishing we had done more. Instead, let's do everything we can now.