

Assistant Secretary Juliette Kayyem, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) spoke for the World Affairs Council Jacksonville at UNF 2/2/10. She outlined the challenges and complexities facing the nine-year old, post 9/11 federal agency. DHS has 230,000 employees principally drawn from combining existing federal agencies such as the U.S. Coast Guard, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Immigration and border security. Responsibilities include both preventing disasters as in counterterrorism and responding to them as in Katrina and Haiti.

Effectiveness in this wide range of responsibilities depends on working closely with local and state emergency action officials and in successful interagency coordination. Learning from mistakes is essential, as in the case of the Christmas "underpants" bomber. If President Obama sounded tough when he spoke publicly of mistakes made, it was mild compared to his mood with senior staff in reviewing events. Sharing intelligence across agencies, and acting on intelligence in a timely way are critical. The amount of incoming intelligence is itself a problem in identifying and sorting out actionable and priority intelligence in a timely way. Systems are in place to connect the intell dots through an interagency counterterrorism task force. Preventive measures are also in place through airport and port security. But nothing is perfect. We have to be right 100% of the time and they only have to be right once.

Terrorists are always looking for openings and ways to game the system. The Christmas bomber originated his flight in Africa, transited Europe and then flew to Detroit. The explosives were concealed in a way to elude most existing security systems. Responding to complaints about Transportation Security Agency (TSA) screenings of unlikely individuals at airports, Assistant Secretary Kayyem said that focusing narrowly on profiling (ethnicity, age, race, sex) would guarantee terrorists ability to game the system.

Much has remained unchanged from the Bush to the Obama Administration. Both made policy decisions that Guantanamo detention facilities should be closed. The "how" is the problem for both. Legislators vocal in supporting the closure of Guantanamo have trenchantly opposed relocating any of the prisoners to facilities in their district or state. Kayyem was enroute to NYC to review with Mayor Bloomberg opposition to the Administration's decision to try high profile terrorists in federal courts near the 9/11 site.

Responding to a question about the degree of risk faced by individual Americans Assistant Secretary Kayyem underscored the need for a measured tone. Yes there will be another incident. We need to be alert, but there is no need for generalized alarm. It is unlikely that anyone in the audience will die from the action of a terrorist. More likely it will be from something like texting while driving which poses a far greater risk.

She urged, however, that everyone have disaster preparations (water, food, etc) ready for their households at all times, be it for a natural disaster or for something involving terrorism. Inquiring of the Florida audience (well accustomed she assumed to the dangers of hurricane) how many had emergency preparedness kits in their homes, only a few raised their hands. We all have much to do to be prepared ourselves.

The Department of Homeland Security is a young agency facing a huge task and it is still on a learning curve. The better prepared we all are and the more supportive we are of prevention measures, the more effective everyone can be.

-Ambassador Marilyn McAfee (r.)