



U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON

Finance

SENATOR CHUCK GRASSLEY, OF IOWA - CHAIRMAN

<http://finance.senate.gov>

Opening Statement of Sen. Chuck Grassley, of Iowa
Committee on Finance Oversight Hearing
“The U.S. Border: Safe or Sieve?”
Thursday, January 30, 2003

Good morning and thank you all for coming.

I called this hearing to examine the security of our nation’s borders. We should all know how important this is. Even before the attacks of September 11, terrorists had exploited loopholes in our immigration system and lax security at ports of entry. If we’re serious about protecting this country from new attacks, then we have to get serious about border security. So we’re here to do some oversight and find out if our borders are safe, or like a sieve.

As the chairman and ranking member of the Finance Committee, both I and Senator Baucus are worried about the illegal transport of currency -- especially counterfeit money or terrorism funds – through our borders. As you all know, this currency can cause enormous damage by undermining our markets, or supporting the drug trade and terrorists. So I am looking forward to a candid hearing about the security of our borders.

I have a particular concern about INS enforcement. If we don’t secure the border, the consequences affect the whole country. More and more, my state of Iowa is becoming a byway for smugglers and illegal immigrants. The INS enforcement problems have real consequences not just for national security but for immigrants who often are duped by smugglers. For example, last year, 11 immigrants were trapped for weeks in a railroad box car near Denison and died. And just a few weeks ago, nine people died when a van full of immigrants crashed in Menlo. We need better enforcement to prevent these tragedies. I think an INS office in the Quad Cities, which I’ve been asking for, might help with that.

We may hear some criticism today, but that’s not the point. We’re here to improve our security. I think Congressional oversight is one of the best ways to do that. It’s a crucial part of our Constitutional system of checks and balances. We have to find out what’s not working so we can make it better.

The timing of this hearing is important. The new Department of Homeland Security is becoming operational and faces big challenges. I think border security is going to be one of the

biggest problems. So we're going to find out what's going on with the agencies responsible for the border – the INS, Customs Service and the Interior Department.

The Department of Homeland Security can take lessons from this, and I hope they are implemented. And I hope this sends a message to any bureaucrat at the Interior Department who stands in the way of law enforcement reform and border security – that message is: Forget about your turf and power, and think about people's lives.

I want to thank all of you for being here. I especially want to thank GAO and the Interior Department Inspector General Devaney for the excellent oversight work they've done, and Agent Dan Wirth, with FLEOA for giving us the ground-level view of the border situation.

And I thank INS, Customs and the Interior Department for sending their representatives.

The first part of our hearing will focus on ports of entry, the responsibility of the INS and Customs. Senator Baucus and I asked the GAO's Office of Special Investigations, the OSI, to test our borders to find out how easy it is for people using bogus IDs to carry undeclared money and credit cards across the borders. The investigation took place on the Northern border, the Southwest border, and at a major international airport by way of the Caribbean. The border was tested by sea, by air, by car, and on foot. In every instance, our border was penetrated -- sometimes the investigators didn't even need their fake IDs. And in every instance, undercover agents carried undeclared cash or credit cards across the border.

These results should trouble all of us. Today, we will hear from the GAO team that carried out the investigation. I know that we will all find their testimony most captivating, and most disturbing.

Shortly after this investigation concluded, the INS and the Customs Service were briefed on the exact details of the investigation. After the GAO agents speak, we will hear from INS and Customs officials about how this happened and what steps are being taken to improve border security.

The second focus is the Interior Department's border responsibilities. The Interior Department is in charge of 37 percent of the Southwest Border with national parks and other public land. In the Spring of last year, I launched an investigation into law enforcement problems at Interior. My investigation was triggered by an IG report, issued at the request of Secretary Norton, calling for massive reform of the Interior law enforcement force.

My oversight investigators found that the hardening of ports of entry by INS and the Customs Service has pushed drug smugglers and illegal aliens into desolate and rugged Interior Department land. So the result of the squeeze at the port of entry is a bulge at the more remote borders controlled by Interior.

This bulge puts Americans and Interior law enforcement personnel at risk. Last summer,

Ranger Chris Eggle was killed by a fugitive drug smuggler from Mexico while he was patrolling Arizona's Oregon Pipe Cactus Monument Park. I know an investigative report is forthcoming, but I'm concerned about whether rangers like Ranger Eggle are getting proper training and support to defend our borders, or even themselves. I know that Ranger Eggle's murder, and the border problem in Arizona, is a concern for Sen. Kyl, who is a member of this committee.

Earl Devaney, the Inspector General, is here to testify. I expect that he will describe the nature of the problems in the four thousand plus law enforcement force, the third largest in the federal government. He will also be able to describe problems at the border, and how reforms would help solve those problems. I hope Inspector General Devaney can also tell us about a new whistleblower protection program in his office, because whistleblowers are so important for oversight.

We also have with us Dan Wirth, who is speaking as the representative for Park Service federal agents to the Federal Law Enforcement Officers Association. Agent Wirth is the border coordinator for the Interior Department in Tucson, Arizona. He can give us a view from the front lines, and help us understand just what's going wrong at the Southwest border.

I understand that Agent Wirth will be showing us some alarming night-vision footage of unidentified illegal aliens crossing the Southwest border through family campgrounds. I look forward to seeing that footage and know you all will too.

Finally, we will hear from Don Murphy, Deputy Director of the Park Service. Mr. Murphy can bring us up to date on the state of reform at Interior, and, along with Mr. Devaney and Agent Wirth, can help us discuss solutions to the border problem at Interior.

So I look forward to a very constructive hearing, and I again thank all the witnesses for your time and effort. I believe Senator Baucus may have some remarks. Senator Baucus...