

Remarks by

W. Ralph Basham

Confirmation Hearing

for

Commissioner

**U.S. Customs and Border Protection
Department of Homeland Security**

before the

**United States Senate
Committee on Finance**

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NOTE: This is the prepared text and may not reflect changes in actual delivery

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Chairman Grassley, Senator Baucus and Members of the Committee, I am pleased to appear before you today as the President's nominee for Commissioner of United States Customs and Border Protection.

I want to begin by thanking President Bush for nominating me to lead an agency of such strategic importance to the security of our nation.

And, I thank Secretary Chertoff and Deputy Secretary Jackson for their support and confidence.

I especially want to thank my wife, Judy—and my children—who are here with me today. They have supported me through my years of public service—and in particular, over the last few months. I would not be here without them.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the support and guidance you and the Members of this Committee—and your staffs—have given to me during this confirmation process. It is indeed an honor to come before you today.

People have asked me, in this process, why I'd leave what many may consider to be one of the best jobs in Washington—Director of the United States Secret Service.

Although the emotions of the decision are complicated, my answer is simple and two-fold—duty and a desire to contribute. Having spent over three decades in career public service, when the President asks you to take on an assignment, I feel there is a duty to serve. The second part of my answer is that I believe CBP plays a key role in maintaining our national security—and I can help guide it at a critical time.

CBP keeps our nation strong by guarding our borders, securing trade and our economy, collecting revenue and enforcing trade laws, protecting our food supply, and preventing illegal drugs from reaching our streets. And, I firmly believe that I can make a real and positive difference by continuing to serve our nation in the challenging role of CBP Commissioner.

Calling the role of the next Commissioner “challenging” is an understatement. But I firmly believe the law enforcement experiences and leadership roles of my career have prepared me to lead the men and women of Customs and Border Protection, if I am fortunate enough to be given that opportunity.

In many ways, my experiences in government—as the head of the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, helping to start up the Transportation Security Administration, and particularly my three decades with the Secret Service—have given me the right combination of skills and background to take on this new responsibility.

CBP's most critical mission—and greatest challenge—is preventing terrorists and terrorist weapons from getting into the country, but doing so while still allowing legitimate trade and travel to flow freely.

It is a constant balancing act of protection and facilitation. And, it is a mission that depends on our partnerships with others.

The challenges CBP faces are not unlike what the Secret Service encounters in protecting the President and the White House on a daily basis. The potential consequences of either agency being wrong on security, even one time, are terrible and sobering.

While security is uppermost in our minds, we recognize that every day the President must conduct the people's business. Staff and visitors, with legitimate purposes, must flow in and out of the perimeters we set. Food, supplies, and the White House domestic staff must enter and leave at all hours. And, when the President travels, we must rely on the cooperation of other law enforcement agencies and the private sector, and we have developed and maintain strong partnerships with them. We do so for one important reason—"necessity."

Both CBP and the Secret Service must deal with the constant tension of maintaining a balance between security and facilitation. If the Secret Service let security become its one and only concern, then the President and his staff would not be able to do their jobs. Likewise, if CBP focuses solely on securing trade and travel at the expense of free movement, our liberty and economy will suffer.

I recognize that this Committee, Congress, and the trade and travel communities will be very focused on whether the next Commissioner is finding that appropriate balance. I also know they will be quick to advise if CBP is not.

If confirmed, I am fortunate to follow in the footsteps of former Commissioner Rob Bonner, a visionary leader who, along with the men and women of CBP, laid a solid foundation for Customs and Border Protection. The next Commissioner must be prepared to build on that legacy and move the agency forward.

As a fellow agency head within the Department of Homeland Security, I have worked with—and closely observed—CBP and its first and only Commissioner.

The broad course and vision that Commissioner Bonner set for the agency is, in my view, the right one:

- partnering with other nations to push our borders out;
- using a layered and risk-based approach against terrorism;
- partnering with the private sector and global trade community;
- unifying disparate functions and people into a single frontline agency;
- gaining operational control of our borders; and
- balancing the security and facilitation of trade and travel.

While many challenges to implement that vision remain, I see no need for a dramatic change in course for CBP. Rather, as many of you have told me, the next Commissioner will have to stay the course, but urgently move the agency forward—and I agree.

If confirmed, I hope that I can bring the steady and experienced leadership, and the ability to foster relationships within the Department and the Administration, to guide CBP beyond its formative years.

If confirmed, I also look forward to working closely with this Committee and the Congress, so that we can meet the present and future goals together.

In this new century threatened by terrorism, we are called upon to confront the challenges we face head on and to accept the responsibility of one of the most important jobs in America today—securing and protecting our homeland and the American people.

The next few years will be monumentally important to the history of CBP—and to our nation. What we do—or fail to do—to secure our nation and protect our economy will make a profound difference to future generations.

Years from now, when we look back on the opportunities we had to build and grow something as important as America's frontline agency, we all want to look back with pride, and not regret, on the choices we made.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for scheduling this hearing today, and I look forward to answering any questions from you or Members of the Committee at this time.