

“Riding the Rails: How Secure is our Passenger and Transit Infrastructure?”
Governmental Affairs Committee
Chairman Joseph Lieberman
December 13, 2001

Good morning and welcome to our hearing today on “Riding the Rails: How Secure is our Passenger and Transit Infrastructure?” - the latest in the Governmental Affairs Committee’s string of hearings examining the federal government’s ability to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks here at home.

Since September 11, the Committee has held nearly a dozen hearings on homeland security, each time looking at a different slice of the whole picture. We have examined the security of our airports and our shipping ports. We have looked at how the Postal Service responded to anthrax sent through the mails. Just two days ago, we took a look at how we might strengthen the relationship between federal, state and local governments with regard to homeland defense. Throughout, we have tried to determine how the federal government can better organize itself to quickly and effectively respond to acts of terror and proactively prevent future threats.

This extensive examination has enlightened us, I think, to the different needs and concerns of a variety of sectors but it has also revealed some common threads. Almost to a witness, the Committee has heard indications of poor coordination between the different levels and layers of government. And we have heard frequent complaints about the failure to share information among layers of government.

Today, as we explore the ability of our rail and transit systems to protect their passengers and infrastructure, these common themes once again will come into play.

Attention has been paid to airport security, and with good reason because the attacks against us on September 11 occurred through the aviation system. But there has not been comparable attention to rail security, which is no longer acceptable, because trains can also be a terrorist target, particularly since they travel in a predictable path at predictable times. Every year, America’s public transportation infrastructure - by which I mean subways, light rail, commuter rail services as well as buses and ferries - carries 9 billion passengers. Let me repeat that - 9 billion passengers use our transit systems, as compared to 700 million air travelers annually. So, we have a lot more people depending on the transit system. Transit systems, in fact, have experienced the highest growth rate of any transportation mode over the past five years. Today, we’re going to ask what have we done and what can we do to secure them?

The enormous number of people who ride the rails begins to explain why transit systems must be better protected. The fact is that our transportation system plays a critical role in the very security of the nation. After September 11, Amtrak, for example, helped bring emergency supplies to New York, provided passage for

families of the World Trade Center victims, and helped transport mail around the country. Here, in the Washington metropolitan area, half of the metro stations serve federal facilities, so they're important to the ongoing operation of the federal government, and a third of its riders are federal employees. By moving people to and from jobs, these transit systems keep our country going.

Passenger and transit rails are also essential components of any evacuation from a disaster site - as was the case on September 11 in New York City where trains unloaded passengers, then returned to ground zero to move stranded people out of harm's way, and here in Washington where the metro carried Washington area workers away from the Pentagon and the Capital to the safety of their homes. Unfortunately, terror is not a new threat for transit systems. The Department of Transportation reported in 1997 that, in the previous six years, public transportation had been the target of 20 to 35 percent of terrorist attacks worldwide. In this country, we have thus far been relatively spared and fortunate, but an unknown saboteur derailed Amtrak's Sunset Limited in Arizona in October 1995, killing one person and injuring 100. And, in a very different way, the 1993 shootings aboard the Long Island Railroad also opened our eyes to the rail systems' susceptibility to violence because they are a gathering place for people.

The most devastating attack worldwide, of course, was launched against Tokyo subway commuters in March 1995, when terrorists released sarin gas during the morning rush hour, killing 12 people and making thousands of others ill. The next year, another attack on the Tokyo subway was thwarted when a package of hydrogen cyanide gas was discovered in a station restroom. Bombs have also exploded in train stations in Italy, the Paris metro, and in buses that have been regularly blown apart in Israel by terrorists, including in recent days.

With this history, several transit systems have adopted plans to prevent and respond to a terrorist attack, including improved ties with local, state and federal law enforcement agencies, awareness training and revised emergency procedures. In fact, well before September 11, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority implemented a range of anti-terrorism measures, such as chemical-detecting sensors and annual terrorism training for transit police officers. Since September 11, the Boston transit authority, for example, has created a four-member task force to examine ways of improving its ability to ensure the safety of its subway and bus riders.

But we have to ask are these fragmented efforts enough? We must ask what the federal role is in overseeing and stimulating the security of the nation's transit systems. Transit security must not be side-tracked while other homeland defense concerns claim our time and resources. We need to bring as much talent, and focus, as many tools, training and technology, and ultimately, as much financial support to the challenge of securing our rails as we do for the security of other

elements of our critical infrastructure. I say that, again, because of the number of people who travel on rail and transit systems, predictable places and times in which they travel, and the extent that our economy relies on the smooth operation of these systems.

I hope that today's hearing will help us to learn who has security plans in place, who is developing plans, what the federal government is doing and what more it must do - in conjunction with the private sector and state and local governments - to take steps to protect America's transit and rail passengers.