

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Fred Thompson
Hearing: “Terrorism Through the Mail: Protecting Postal
Workers and the Public”
Tuesday, October 30, 2001

“Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to thank the Postmaster General, union representatives, and postal workers for coming today. This is a difficult time for you as you have recently lost two of your colleagues in the last two weeks and that others remain ill. It is my hope that we can use this time to explore procedures, protocols, and technology which can be used to make our postal facilities safe and secure for you and your co-workers, and the entire system safer for the general public.

“This is not just a postal service problem. We’re here because those responsible chose this way this time. There is no doubt we have been behind the curve in responding to biological attacks. I find it remarkable we know so little about some of the properties of anthrax itself – how the powder reacts in an envelope, for example – or what works against it.

“For several years, many organizations, including GAO, the Hart-Rudman Commission, the Gilmore Commission and others have recommended comprehensive threat and risk assessments for chemical and biological weapons attacks on our soil. As far back as 1997, GAO recommended that these assessments be conducted so that federal and state governments could properly prepare for such attacks. I understand that the FBI finally began work on a domestic threat assessment in July 1999 and it should be completed soon. Clearly, these assessments should have been completed much earlier. I do believe that completion of such threat assessments in the future could help make us more prepared when the next shoe falls.

“In all fairness, though, even the experts who thought about mass casualty attacks, as far as my staff has found, never focused on the use of anthrax through the mail, even though the threat was not beyond comprehension. There have been a number of hoaxes over the years where powder was sent through the mail with letters indicating it was anthrax. One such letter was received in Knoxville, Tennessee back in 1998.

“But whatever our level of preparedness has been in the past, it’s clear now that we have to do more to protect our workers and the American public. Congressional staff was briefed last Friday on new technologies and machinery being considered by the Postal Service, including ways to make collection boxes safer, to keep the air in our facilities cleaner, and even to kill potentially dangerous biological agents being sent through the mail. I’m glad to see the Postal Service is moving forward with these new technologies, Mr. Potter.

“I’m glad to get labor representatives and postal representatives together to discuss this problem. Threats affect all of us at home and abroad. Danger has gotten our attention and frankly I think we’ve done a pretty good job of responding. Experts we’re hearing from aren’t used to being experts, and the phrase “steep learning curve” has taken on new meaning. In less than two months we’ve set up an Office of Homeland Security and appointed a Director. We’ve engaged the entire medical community, including the CDC, the Surgeon General, and public health officials. We’ve passed a terrorism bill. We will shortly have an airport security bill, and we’ve managed to keep to our legislative schedule.

“We need to understand that in the process there will be problems, but that we’ll overcome those problems. I take a backseat to nobody in criticizing wasteful and ineffective government. But there comes a time to see the positive and the good that we can accomplish when we bring the forces of our government to bear on a

problem.

“I believe that this also applies to the “hot” war in Afghanistan. It is important that we do not undermine our resolve or our mental condition. I see headlines announcing that the war will go on longer than expected. I don’t know who that was news to, particularly in this town, with experts telling us of these threats for years. There are demands from our new allies that the war be shorter or that we avoid bombing during certain times. Some choose to talk only about the inevitable tragedy of military and civilian casualties. Some opinion makers decided this should be our focus, both at home and abroad. There is little doubt here and abroad as to our military strength, but there is doubt of our stamina, and we’re seeing the problems resulting from not having taken decisive action in the past.

“According to Paul Light, director of the Presidential Appointee Initiative at the Brookings Institution, 164 positions were identified as involving the fight against the war on terrorism, including homeland security and bioterrorism. These include positions at the Departments of Defense, Treasury, Transportation, and at FEMA. Of those positions, 37% are vacant or have people who have only occupied positions since September 11, 27% are vacant today, and of those vacancies in positions with responsibility for biological threats, only 45 of 71 positions are filled.

“Some of the positions that remain unconfirmed include the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Chemical and Biological Defense Programs at DOD, the Director of the Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management at DOE, the Assistant Secretary of Energy for Environment, Safety, and Health at DOE, the Special Representative for Nuclear Nonproliferation at DOS, the Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration at DOS, the Deputy Director at FEMA, and the Associate Director for Preparedness, Training, and Exercise Directorate at FEMA. It is critical that the Administration get nominees up here and that Congress act quickly. This is a government-wide problem and the longer it takes, the higher the toll it can take on national security.

“I think the American people understand this war will be long and deliberate. We are not omnipotent or mistake free, but we *are* on the side of right. We will look out for each other, but what we cannot do is let our misgivings, doubts, or disagreements lessen our commitment or our faith in our government. And that applies to those inevitable sideline critics that would nip at the heels of our determination in either our war abroad or our new war at home.”