



June 28, 2017

Annual Conference Transcript
Keynote Address by John F. Kelly

John F. Kelly
U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security

Richard Fontaine, President
Center for a New American Security

Begin Transcript

RICHARD FONTAINE: (In progress) – follow the discussion with General McMaster with another discussion with another individual who’s shown a true commitment and a passion for public service throughout the entirety of his career. We’re very pleased to have Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly with us today.

He’s a retired Marine Corps general and brings truly a wealth of experience serving in a number of national security roles. It would take me quite a while to go through all of the distinguished positions he’s held in his career, but I’ll just mention a couple of them because I think they bear on the kind of expertise he brings to this current job.

General Kelly was the commander of U.S. Southern Command from 2012 to 2016, and in that role he was responsible for all American military operations in Central America, South America and the Caribbean – an experience that clearly is relevant in his role as secretary of Homeland Security. He was a commanding general of the Multi-National Force West in Iraq from 2008 to 2009 and a former commander of Marine Forces Reserve and Marine Forces North from 2009 to 2011. And he served as a senior military assistant to both Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta.

He was out of military service for a grand total of eight months before the country called him back in and he answered the call. We are very thankful that he’s with us today to lend some insights on the national security and homeland security challenges that face the country.

Secretary Kelly is going to make some remarks first and then we’re going to go into a conversation here. Part of that conversation will be an opportunity for you to ask questions, which we’re going to do by Twitter. So if you have a question, tweet it to @cnasdc and we’re

Bold.

Innovative.

Bipartisan.

going to collect those and then be able to ask him some of those questions. But, in the meantime, please join me in welcoming Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly. (Applause.)

JOHN KELLY [Secretary of Homeland Security]: Thanks very much. I want to make a few comments about a new initiative that will be made public – well, I guess it’s going to be made public right now and then sit down, take some questions. But, thank you, Richard.

And the topic I want to just make a few comments on has to do with aviation security. I don’t have to tell really anyone in the world that was alive then that since 9/11 the United States has seen a series of attempts on commercial aviation – shoe bomber, liquid explosives, an underwear bomber, a plot to detonate explosive cargo. Most of these were disrupted just in time and didn’t result in the tragedy that the terrorists were looking for.

But in 2015, ISIS claimed responsibility for the bombing of Metro Jet flight 9268, which killed 224 people on board, became the deadliest air disaster in Russian history. Terrorists want to bring down aircraft to instill fear, disrupt our economies, and undermine our way of life. And it works. Which is why they still see aviation as the crown jewel target in their world.

The threat has not diminished. In fact, I am concerned that we are seeing renewed interest on the part of terrorist groups to go after the aviation sector, from bombing aircraft to attacking airports on the ground, as we saw in Brussels and Istanbul.

However, we are not standing on the sidelines while fanatics hatch new plots. The U.S. government is focused on deterring, detecting, and disrupting these threats. That is why in March I made the decision to ban electronic devices larger than a cell phone from the passenger cabins of U.S.-bound commercial flights from the 10 airports in the Middle East and North Africa. I made this call based on evaluated intelligence and real concerns that I had about terrorist plotting. Make no mistake: our enemies are constantly working to find new methods for disguising explosives, recruiting insiders, and hijacking aircraft.

I’ve made a point to talk with everyone I can about securing aviation. I’ve met with our international partners. I’ve met with our industry leaders. I’ve met with other private sector stakeholders. My conclusion is this: it is time that we raise the global baseline of aviation security. We cannot play international whack-a-mole with each new threat. Instead, we must put in place new measures across the board to keep the traveling public safe and make it harder for terrorists to succeed.

Today, I am announcing a first step toward this goal by requiring new security measures to be applied to all commercial flights coming into the United States from abroad. These measures will be both seen and unseen, and they will be phased in over time. They will include enhanced screening of electronic devices, more thorough passenger vetting, and new measures designed to mitigate the potential threat of insider attacks.

We will also lay out a clear path to encourage airlines and airports to adopt more sophisticated screening approaches, including better use of explosive detection canines and

advanced checkpoint screening technology. Additionally, we will encourage more airports to become Preclearance locations. This not only enhances security, it also increases convenience by allowing international travelers to go through customs and border security screening before boarding flights to the United States.

With this announcement, we send a clear message that inaction is not an option. Those who choose not to cooperate or are slow to adopt these measures could be subject to other restrictions, including a ban on electronic devices on aircraft or even a suspension of their flights into the United States.

However, and all the indication are that all airlines will work with us to keep their aircraft, their crew, and their passengers safe. I have spent months engaging with our closest allies and foreign partners on this issue, and many of them have expressed strong support for this effort.

While these actions we are announcing today will improve the security of U.S.-bound flights, I am hopeful other nations will follow suit. Unless we all raise our security standards, terrorists, who see commercial aviation as the greatest takedown, will find and attack the weakest link.

Together, we have the opportunity to raise the baseline on aviation security globally, and we can do it in a manner that will not unduly inconvenience the flying public.

Let me be clear: security is my number one concern. Our enemies are adaptive, and we have to be adaptive as well. A number of the measures we plan to put in place can be dialed up or down in a risk-based, intelligence-driven manner. And over the next several weeks and months, we'll work with our partners to ensure these measures are fully implemented.

Again, today is just the starting point. We are taking prudent steps to make aircraft more secure, to reduce insider threats, and to identify suspicious passengers. In the meantime, we will launch a concerted effort with our foreign partners to put in place wider counterterrorism improvements. This will include better information sharing, expanded exchanges of terrorist watch lists, and more advanced security checks of travelers around the world.

Finally, let me commend all the outstanding men and women throughout the Department who make aviation security their daily mission. Whether they are working on the front lines at the TSA checkpoint, developing better screening technology in the labs, or preparing the intelligence that helps us make tough decisions, every passenger owes them a debt of gratitude. I am proud to lead them, and all of the DHS employees who make our nation more secure.

I also want to thank our international partners and the airlines I have met with recently. We have had productive discussions about the threats we face, and I am encouraged by their effort to find solutions with us that will help elevate global security standards.

Thank you for the invitation to speak today, Richard. I look forward to my conversation with you on this issue and a full range of other issues so important to the American people. Thank you. (Applause.)

MR. FONTAINE: Well, thank you, Mr. Secretary, for joining today. I'm sure in the coming days you'll get plenty of questions about some of the specifics of what you just announced here. But I'd like to take the opportunity to ask you a few more questions about kind of the fundamental approach that you take to homeland security and to national security.

So maybe we can start with – you know, when you make a decision like the one that you just announced, you mentioned that security is your top objective, but, of course, there are other objectives as well. And, you know, each measure has some cost inconvenience and other things like that. How do you think through this balance between protecting against every conceivable threat that might be posed to aviation or anything else and, you know, sort of the regular daily life of Americans who want to sort of go about their business?

SEC. KELLY: Great question. I think – I know that I spend all of my time worrying about these threats. Most of the people in homeland security do that as well. The good news is most Americans don't have to worry very much about it. I think the trust and confidence that most of the people in the United States have in people like in law enforcement or DHS is a tribute to the good work that we do. But on a case like this, whether it's aviation security or any range of other things that we do, obviously we collect as much intelligence, as much perspective, interact with as many people as possible, certainly bring it to the White House level, take it to the interagency, and then come up with a decision.

I have found at least in my 45 years as a Marine, you find the person that has the responsibility, in this case, me, for this kind of security. That person should listen to everybody, dissenting views as well – maybe more importantly dissenting views, but then make the decision. I'm not much of a believer in collective decisions because responsibility I think rests with one person.

In the case of the aviation decision I made on the 21st of March to ban large electronic devices from passenger compartments. It was based on intelligence, a great deal of input from across the interagency, particularly FBI and CIA and the military, international intelligence partners and then make the decision that it was focused on a real threat. And the airports that we declared were the airports we saw most of the time in the chatter and the good news is now I think we will find a way to raise the bar worldwide and, at the same time, not inconvenience the traveling public too very much at much cost to aviation security.

MR. FONTAINE: Thanks. And I wanted to also step back on – this is, as you said, a response to a particular terrorist threat. But if you step back and look at the fight that the United States has been waging against terrorism and the way it's morphed since even before 9/11 to today, this is – you see this every day. How are we doing in the war on terror? Are we winning it, are we losing it? Is the terrorist threat increasing, decreasing, and how do we know?

SEC. KELLY: Well, I don't think you can actually at least right now put it in terms of winning or losing. I think the best way to look at it is we're dealing with it. As we reacted to 9/11 and took the fight overseas to al Qaeda, they morphed. And as over time other terrorist organizations rose up, ISIS as an example, they rose up to do the best they could to hurt us. The caliphate was created. Right now, the caliphate is on the way out, I believe. I mean, the coalition that is taking the fight to the caliphate in both Iraq and Turkey are shrinking it.

The next step and I think – I was just up in Ottawa with the Five Eyes. Much of the discussions we had up there revolved around the return of the fighters and they're not in most cases with the expressed intent to bring the fight back to Western Europe or to their homelands. Every one of the European nations, regardless whether they're in Five Eyes or not are concerned about this, something in the neighborhood of 5,000 perhaps fighters. These are overwhelmingly people who were born in Europe, hold European passports.

In our own country, the United States I think there's something on the order of about 300 that have gone to the fight, some of them killed, some are still in the fight. I know in my last job I was very concerned about a couple of locations in the Caribbean. We knew that about 110 or so, mostly young men from those locations went to the fight. Some of them are already returning. And, again, they're returning not to, you know, buy a piece of land and settle down. They're returning to do – to continue the jihad only in another way. This thing is morphing all across North Africa, Central Africa, throughout the Middle East as everything I just said about Europe in the West.

This is going to be with us for a while. I don't think we can shoot our way out of it but intel should be able to drive our responses, always of course within the rule of law, always within the laws of our individual countries. But we're going to be dealing with this for some time.

MR. FONTAINE: Do you expect it to get worse before it gets better?

SEC. KELLY: Again, worse is a relative term. I mean, just 9/11 was pretty bad. Luckily, we have not had an event like that in our country. But other events overseas have been pretty horrific. Of course, the great – perhaps the least likely I hope but the biggest catastrophe would be an atomic device of some type smuggled into the country or a biological weapon that set off a pandemic. That's why, again, not to go down this road too early in the conversation, but that's why securing our borders is so important. And we are doing that already working with our partners to the south and to the north, working all around the world with our partners that send commercial shipping to our country, but it's vitally important to secure the borders and the homeland.

MR. FONTAINE: You mentioned that we can't shoot our way out of the problem with terrorism or at least no exclusively shoot our way out of terrorism – these are the Twitter questions.

SEC. KELLY: Here they come.

MR. FONTAINE: There's quite a few of these. People are eager. You know, DHS is involved in countering violent extremism programs and things like that. How do you sort of assess where are on the war of ideas element of this, the recruiting the attractions of extremism to individuals because, of course, you know, if you don't stop the pipeline, you can't stop the problem. Have we gotten our arms around how we can actually do that effectively as a government?

SEC. KELLY: You know, the first thing I would say is extremism comes in many forms. One of the things certainly that I was very interested in, now we do it routinely at DHS that we perhaps didn't do before, the chatter, the talk within the organization, when we talked about terrorism, extremism rather, was all about Islamic-fueled extremism, but I asked the question about what about neo-Nazis, what about white supremacists, what about anti-Semitic organizations? So we track that as well because extremists, as I say, come in many, many variations.

The one constant it seems to me, and, again, most people, my counterparts around the world would say the one constant in all of this extremism is the Internet. The Internet is an absolutely wonderful, wonderful human invention, but it also can be like any human invention used in terrible ways. Our appeal to providers is to do a better job in terms of locating some of this extremist material that's on the net and taking it down. What we're really trying to do is prevent the young man from doing something horrific as opposed to capture him or to arrest him after he's done it.

The question I ask of all my counterparts around the world, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, everywhere, everyone I talk to is how do you prevent it? How do you find the individual that is getting extreme and prevent him from making that horrible step?

And the answer that I found everywhere, it begins in the home, parents watching what their kids are looking at on the Internet, listening to what they're saying, schools, mosques, churches, synagogues listening – you know, the holy men and women listening to what is said.

Many times in the forensics of some of these horrific attacks, it would be an imam who said he was radical and I no longer allowed him to come to our mosque, or in the case of the white supremacist that blew up the church down in Charleston where people had said, yeah, we didn't want him in our congregation because he would spout this anti – this white supremacist rhetoric. Certainly a relationship in many, many, many – and this is good news – many police departments here in the United States have community outreach programs so that people are not afraid to contact the police before their son or daughter takes that terrible last step.

Relationships with imams and churches so that they can call police and say, this young man, young woman is really saying some terribly hateful, radical things, and I think they're going down the wrong – but, at the end of it all, it's just a small number of people that go down this road, the overwhelming number of Christians, Jews, Sikhs, Muslims are good people and we should never, ever forget that.

MR. FONTAINE: Absolutely. Let me ask you about the social response to the threat of terrorism as opposed to just the government response. You know, it's striking at least to me the way the British and their kind of stiff upper lip, keep calm and carry on, you know, way have suffered repeated, horrific attacks and then, you know, are sort of almost socially determined not to let that get in the way of them going about their daily lives and things like that.

I mean, is it realistic to have zero attacks in the United States in the future? And, you know, is there a way in which society can or should become more resilient to inevitable attacks if, in fact, there will be more than zero in the future?

SEC. KELLY: Well, I think we certainly cannot expect zero attacks. I mean, we've actually done pretty well in terms of external attacks. Now, the homegrown San Bernardinos and Orlandos, I mean, that's the reality of the world we live in today. Good police work and, as I say, good reporting by people, a lot of the times – a number of times in some of these attacks that have happened, San Bernardino comes to mind but certainly Orlando, Chattanooga, next-door neighbors have said, I saw that coming.

Or the kid that blew up the African-American church in Charleston, you know, neighbors said, I saw that coming. He used to say these things. And you wonder why people don't report. There was a neighbor I think in the San Bernardino case that said it, and when the media said, well, why didn't you report it if it was so obvious to you, he said, well, I didn't want to run the risk of being taken to court for slander or whatever. But I think I'd err on the side of caution if I was a neighbor.

But I think it's just – it's something that is the reality of the time in which we live. If you see something, as Jeh Johnson I think started this program in DHS when he was the secretary, if you see something, say something, whether it's an anonymous 9/11 call or just a call to a friend who's a police officer. But I think that's the way we're going to get our arms around this problem.

As far as the response of the nation – and I was just talking to my counterpart in Britain up in Ottawa yesterday on this topic, every time they've had it happen, and it's been four times in five months they've had these attacks, Manchester, London and a couple of other events they've had, they're very attuned to these immediate responses against – you know, retaliatory responses against the Muslim community. One of the things they do is immediately have kind of an all-faith event to where men and women of all faith come together and show solidarity. So that's the kind of thing.

I mean, we're all Americans. It doesn't matter, you know, what God you worship. We're all Americans. We all generally want the same thing out of life as each other, so we ought to kind of shoulder to shoulder take this thing on. And if it does happen, come together as a people and condemn it, regardless of whether it's a white supremacist or an Islamic radical. It's the only way to get through this.

MR. FONTAINE: All right. Well, we can switch gears a little bit. I have a Twitter question here so I am as I would say almost everyone in this room knows a few years ago, OPM had a major cyber-breach and they took probably most of the people's security clearance information, mine too, yours too, you know.

SEC. KELLY: Mine too.

MR. FONTAINE: So we're all in this same boat together. What's the federal government doing to try to prevent another such thing and these kinds of losses, more broadly speaking?

SEC. KELLY: Well, the federal government is doing everything it can. Until I took this job, I didn't realize the capacity, capability that DHS has in terms of cybersecurity. Of course, we're responsible for protecting the dot-gov nets, which hasn't always been perfect. But I think my experts, the people that really know this business in my organization tell me the difference today than even just a couple of years ago is that we've partnered with the commercial cyber sector like seamlessly almost and look to them for the innovations and for the changes and to leverage that. Of course, we offer our defensive help to anyone that wants it.

And, you know, Jeh Johnson in fact just last week appeared at a hearing as to whether during his time – at the end of his time at DHS, they offered help from DHS to the DNC and to the Clinton campaign because they saw – they had a sense for what was going on there. I think going forward, we will – we are already offering our help and certainly plugging in to every single other entity in the U.S. government, in the U.S. economy, overseas to really create a team that works together.

But, you know, we saw one a couple of weeks called the WannaCry. We have one going on right now. The good news is it hasn't hurt this country nearly as bad as it hurt the other countries. But it is eye-watering to me when I first saw it happen, when WannaCry first started how fast DHS brought together the team – the NSA, FBI, the commercial providers. And, you know, partnered with international partners to protect the United States and assist in reducing the damage overseas.

MR. FONTAINE: Okay. You mentioned the importance of secure borders, which is, you know, obviously a topic of active discussion. How porous are our borders, would you say? I mean, do we have terrorists coming over the Southern Border or is this just something that could happen? And, you know, what do you think we need to secure? Is it an actual wall or is it a mix of sensors and barriers and responders and all these things?

SEC. KELLY: Let me go back to when I was in SOUTHCOM. I'd get very, very intense into this network that moves up through the – well, the world, and it moves up through Central America, Mexico, into the United States.

And I would say then frequently in open hearings, in the press that anything that wants to get into the United States can through that network – drugs, hundreds of tons, and I'm not – here

I'm talking hard drugs but hundreds of tons of methamphetamine, heroine, and cocaine ride that network into the United States in a nearly unstoppable way; tens of thousands of illegal persons crossing; million and billions of dollars worth of illicit commercial goods. Terrorists – I'm fairly confident right now they're not riding that network.

We do pick up – we, the United States, our Mexican partners, Central American partners are picking up an increasing number of individuals here, special interest aliens that travel from other parts of the world at great expense to come into the country. Typically, people that spend that kind of money are not coming here for – you know, to drive a taxi in Washington, D.C., or to wash dishes. They're coming here for another reason. But, right now, we're actually very, very good at locating them and sending them back before they ever get into the United States.

But, as I say, the network is very, very efficient. How do we stop it? We stop it with technology, we stop it with physical barriers. They work, and we're working towards that. But we also stop it working very, very closely with our partners, information, passenger information exchange, and just being shoulder to shoulder with them. And it does work.

So it's not one single thing that does it. It's not one wall or just technology or just CVP. It's all of that, to include, again, the great partners, the Mexicans and Central Americans that we work with.

MR. FONTAINE: And on the travel ban or the executive order, with the Supreme Court's decision I know before you were saying that it didn't – because of the injunction, it didn't allow you to conduct the review of procedures that you thought was critical to sort of moving forward. Do you have that space now with the Supreme Court's decision or does that actually have to wait until they make a ruling on the underlying thing? So will this be a moot point by the time the Supreme Court gets to that?

SEC. KELLY: I think we do. One of the things – I mean, I'm a law enforcer but I'm also, you know, a law follower. I told my folks that I didn't want to come anywhere near close to getting crosswise with the court. I think that's the right way to be a public servant.

Now, we're allowed to take a hard look at what we could use going forward. And by the time I believe we win this – the government wins this case in the Supreme Court, we'll be able to move forward not focusing on people from one religion or one culture, but focusing on, you know, every airport, every country around the world and do a better job at determining who the person is that wants to come and why they want to come here.

We have a very, very, very complicated immigration system. I think it needs to be simplified. It certainly needs to be updated. But we have an absolute right to have a pretty good idea, a very good idea of who's coming and why they're coming.

MR. FONTAINE: And you talked about the obvious importance of international partnerships, whether it's with the Canadians and Mexicans or whether our allies and friends in Europe on the whole basket of issues that you have to deal with. But, of course, as a private

sector component, no matter almost any of the issues you're talking about, certainly cyber but some of the other things as well, how much of the partnership with the private sector is a part of what you're doing these days and how tough is it to work with the private sector in order to, you know, sort of come around common approaches?

SEC. KELLY: Yeah. We have a very, very solid outreach in relationship with the private sector across all the areas of responsibility of DHS. Certainly they see it in their interest to tap into any source of solutions that might be out there, and certainly that's where I come down. I mean, they're – generally speaking, the private cyber and other threats, streams like that, they're faster than us. They invest more money than we do. We should take advantage of that and they're always willing to share.

MR. FONTAINE: And how about, you know, state and local, when it comes to, you know, for example, protecting the integrity of our election system, so, you know, according at least to the media reports, when the Obama administration reached out and I think – I believe your predecessor sort of reached out and sort of offered DHS's support for those who might come under threat of cyberattack on voting machines or communications between voting officials and so forth, there was a kind of a thanks, but, you know, no thanks kind of thing from a number of people.

Is this something that you're starting to think through in terms of the interface between what DHS does in order to help protect our election systems against the obvious threats to them and what the state and local folks are doing?

SEC. KELLY: Well, the first thing I'd say to make a little bit of a joke here, but, generally speaking, if someone from Washington shows up and says, I want to help, you should run for the exits. But if someone comes and says, I'm from Washington, I want to partner with you on your terms – Jeh Johnson declared the electoral system – the election system as critical infrastructure just before he stepped down. Based on what we know now, he knew from August through the election period. But the offer is on a voluntary basis. If you don't want to plug in, if you don't want us to help, try to help, then that's fine.

So it's purely voluntary. I fully understand the sensitivities of the states. I've had discussions with the states' attorneys general and other election officials. Some welcomed the possibility, the opportunity. Others are much more wary, but we'll do it on their terms. I would not force this on them. But I would say that if they don't want our help, and even if they do want our help, they'd be well advised to hire some very, very, very good hired cyber guns, if you will, to help protect because this is the wave of the future.

We have an election coming up in 18 months. We'll be back at this with a vengeance at that point. You know, Western Europe just experienced it. We have to protect this or we're not a real democracy anymore if we don't watch out if someone can manipulate vote counts. They didn't last time, but if we ever get to that point where people are actually manipulating vote counts, I would say they'd be well advised to take all the help they can get because I certainly will.

MR. FONTAINE: Let me ask you, too, about Congress, which I'm sure is your favorite topic of all, in part because of the unbelievably fragmented nature of congressional oversight over the Department of Homeland Security.

You know, the last count there is, you know – I mean, there are literally dozens of committees and subcommittees that are overseeing different portions –

SEC. KELLY: A hundred and nineteen.

MR. FONTAINE: A hundred and nineteen. So, you know, if you did – even if you testified before one a day, it would take you until pretty significant portion of the year before you –

SEC. KELLY: And I won't.

MR. FONTAINE: Okay. But how does – can Congress become a more effective sort of partner with DHS in what it's doing? I mean, are there sort of practical things that the Congress can do other than consolidating all those into one committee which they had the opportunity to do back when I was working on the Hill and they decided not to because everybody had their little areas that they wanted to hold on to? So what can Congress do on any of these issues that we're talking about to sort of, you know, be a better partner in homeland security?

SEC. KELLY: Well, I would never criticize the Congress. They're the elected representatives –

MR. FONTAINE: I'll do that for you.

SEC. KELLY: Yeah, please. Do it some more. (Laughter.) But the fact is that they don't want to give up jurisdiction. You know, the department was created 15 or so years ago from all over the federal government, put into DHS. At the time, then, and there still is a need, they should have done much with what like the Department of Defense deals with, you know, full committees and maybe 20 or 25 subcommittees at the most.

They could do that. Chairman McCaul and others in the House and Senate see that as a way forward. You know, the complication for us is just as you might imagine 119 committees and subcommittees. Some of the elements of DHS actually have two committees of jurisdiction. It will go to one and the witness would be warned about some topic, do this or don't do that and they'll go to their other committee and the other committee will have the opposite view.

So something ought to be done. As I say, Chairman McCaul and others like him are doing the best they can. But we've got to pare it down. It is a very complicated organization. But so is the Department of Defense if you look at it. And I know the Department of Defense very well and I'm dangerous enough to say about DHS that, sure, there's a lot of – quarter

million people, there's a lot of variations, there's a lot of different missions, but it's really no different than, say, DOD.

One of the things Jeh Johnson brought in about halfway through his tenure was this topic or this idea of unity of effort where we look at the department and say, okay, what are those things that we can combine, acquisition perhaps and that kind of thing. But we have a long way to go. I wish they had started it 15 years ago when the department was first created.

MR. FONTAINE: And another question I can't resist asking you, because I'm originally from New Orleans, is the lessons of Katrina all these years later. You know, if there's some extreme weather event that happens on your watch, are there – how advanced is DHS now compared to – in its emergency response compared to where it was all those years ago in your assessment to respond effectively to those kinds of real tragedies that affect, you know, so many people?

SEC. KELLY: Great question. I think it's way ahead now. When I first got to the job, there was a – into the job in January, there was a couple of tornadoes, did some damage down on the Mississippi-Georgia line. I called FEMA, just how does this work? And they said, sir, we already have people on the ground there. And the governors hadn't asked. Now, they weren't doing anything other than on-the-ground, ready to go, so as soon as the governor asked for help, they were there already. You know, I called the governor. The next phone call I had was from President Trump who said, hey, you know, should I go down there into that region? I said, no, sir. That's probably the last thing they want right now is for you to show up relative to what the package that goes with you.

But the point is, for several of these kind of tornado events, a snow event up in the north, Pennsylvania, I think, he was very – he would call me very interested in how FEMA adjusted that. Now, he's more – as I am, much more comfortable because the men and women of FEMA, I mean, they lean so far forward – again, always respecting the states and the authorities of the governor, and that's who's really in charge. We support them. But they lean so far forward that they almost fall forward.

So I think we're in a much better place. Some of these events – Katrina, Sandy – are so big that it takes, you know, literally the entire state and federal government. But these men and women really know what they're doing. We've just got a new administrator, Brock Long. He comes with a great deal of experience. He's our FEMA administrator. He was the Alabama – the administrator in Alabama. He's got federal time. He's got state time. He's just a superb pick. I picked him. (Laughter.)

MR. FONTAINE: How could it be any better then?

SEC. KELLY: That's right. And he is a phenomenally talented guy in this regard. And so – I mean, these things can get big, as you know. But I think we're in good hands with FEMA.

MR. FONTAINE: Another Twitter question before we wrap up here in just a minute. Can you talk about the administration proposal to move the Refugee Bureau from the State Department to DHS?

SEC. KELLY: I can't.

MR. FONTAINE: Okay. Well, then that means we can move on to another question in an expeditious manner. (Laughter.) I'll do another Twitter question. Can you talk about the decision to change DHS CVE grants such as cutting off those aimed at neo-Nazi groups?

SEC. KELLY: On the grants, when I first got to the job – and this – I've got a lot of understanding of how federal programs are managed by other federal agencies in my past life, whether it was in Iraq or in Central America, South America. And the one question I always ask is, is this – you know, the example I would give is a conversation I had about gangs in Central America. I said, is this a good program? And they said, oh, my gosh, yeah. We're trying to keep kids from going into the gangs. I said, okay. What we're trying to accomplish is really good, but is it effective? What are the metrics? How do we know that we're spending on this program \$10 million a year for 10 years. Are there more kids in the gangs? The same number of kids? I would argue on both those cases, that's a failure. Or is it a lot fewer kids? And the person that I was talking to said, no, that's exponentially worse.

So maybe we should look at the program, either certainly try to adjust it so it's more effective or effective, or just do away with it. So as I came in, decisions had been made, recommendations had been made before I took over. And so I asked my staff, let's look at those programs and ask those questions. What is the metric of success? First of all, is it even possible to prevent someone from becoming an extremist? But let's ask that question but also say, has the local community – whatever city it is, have they put their own money against this? Because that tells me this buy-in, that they think we can help with our money.

So, as you ask those questions, in many, many cases, the answer was what we're trying to accomplish is certainly honorable and decent and wonderful, but there really is no way that we can determine whether these kinds of programs in the past have been successful. So we found other – what I consider to be other programs that would be, you know, possibly more successful.

Back to my comments when I first mentioned before, though. I mean, I might be the first Homeland Security person because of the surprise – I think I am because this is a surprise I received when I said, what about white supremacists? What about neo-Nazis? What about people who are attacking small African-American churches in the South or anywhere or mosques? Do we know about those kind of things? And the answer was, no, but we will find out.

So I'm very attuned to other forms of extremism. But with a finite amount of money, I wanted to at least start down the road of let's find organizations that we think might be able to deliver – not organizations, but programs. But, you know, these things are always in change. We'll see how those programs do. If they don't seem to work out – again, if the local

communities are not willing to put their own money in, then we'll look for other programs that might prove more effective.

MR. FONTAINE: Mr. Secretary, thank you for your time.

SEC. KELLY: Sure.

MR. FONTAINE: Really appreciate you being here with us.

SEC. KELLY: Thank you, Richard.

MR. FONTAINE: Please join me in thanking the secretary.

SEC. KELLY: Thank you.

End Transcript