

Interview

The New Face of Border Protection

An Interview with W. Ralph Basham, Commissioner,
U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Washington, DC



W. Ralph Basham

EDITORS' NOTE A native of Owensboro, Kentucky, Ralph Basham graduated from Southeastern University in Washington, DC. In 1970, he began a 28-year career with the United States Secret Service that included serving as a Special Agent in the Washington Field Office and as Special Agent in Charge of the Cleveland Field Office, the Washington Field Office, and the Vice Presidential Protective Division. He also served as the Deputy Assistant Director of the Office of Training and Assistant Director of the Office of Administration. In 1998, Basham left the Secret Service to become Director of the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Glynco, Georgia, which provides training for nearly all of the nation's federal law enforcement officers. In 2002, President George W. Bush asked him to return to Washington to serve as Chief of Staff for the newly created Transportation Security Administration (TSA), where he spent one year before returning to the Secret Service as Director in 2003. In 2006, he was sworn in as the second Commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF As the single, unified border agency of the United States, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), a division of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is a 43,000-member federal agency responsible for securing America's borders against terrorist attacks, especially at the ports of entry. Formerly known as U.S. Customs, the

CBP (www.cbp.gov) also enforces laws regarding international trade, immigration, travel, agriculture, and drug interdiction. The agency's total budget for 2007 is \$7.8 billion, a 9.8 percent increase over 2006.

What do you hope to accomplish in your term?

The mission of customs and border protection changed significantly following 9/11. The former U.S. Customs agency had responsibility for collecting customs duties, tariffs, and fines, and enforcing trade laws. They were also responsible for some drug interdiction. When 9/11 occurred, the Bush administration made the decision to combine all of the agencies that had a responsibility at our borders. That included Customs, which would continue to enforce customs and trade laws; components of the former Immigration and Naturalization Services [INS]; parts of the Department of Agriculture, which had the responsibility for interdicting any type of threat to our agricultural crops, flora, and fauna; and the Border Patrol, which was a legacy of the INS. So for the first time ever, one agency was responsible for all of the borders of the United States, and for all threats that came to the borders of the United States. This was a huge paradigm shift for all those legacy agencies.

In my time here, I want to lay the proper foundation for those who follow me. I want to develop the absolute best protocols for protecting this country and its citizens from any threat that is presented to it. That includes terrorists primarily, but also illegal drugs, illegal immigration, and threats against agricultural products in this country. It's a much larger responsibility than the old legacy agencies had to deal with. I also believe that I am responsible for being a good steward of the American taxpayers' dollars. The security side is very important, but equally important is the facilitation of legitimate travel and trade.

Are there similarities between what you did at the Secret Service and what you do at CBP?

There are a lot of similarities. They may not be obvious, but when I was at the Secret Service, my responsibility was to ensure that the President, the Vice President, and their families were safe and secure, and to ensure that the White House was safe and secure. I could have very well imposed a very heavy

blanket of security on the President; I could have surrounded the White House with all sorts of security features as well. But if I did that, he and his staff couldn't go about the people's business. It's the same with the CBP. The CBP has to make sure that this nation is secure from attack, but at the same time, if we shut down the borders, the economic impact would be devastating. And if we allowed that, then the terrorists would win, because they would have successfully attacked this country's ability to engage in legitimate commerce. So there needs to be a balance. Security and facilitation, those are the twin goals. If we don't accomplish those, then I have not done my job.

Is it your agents that travelers see first when entering the United States?

Yes.

For those who do not get granted admission right away, is there a code that agents use when flagging someone for a search?

I could tell you, but I'd have to kill you.

It must be frustrating for those legitimate businesspeople who need to get to important meetings and have a difficult time getting through Customs because of long lines, which in big cities can be 200 to 300 people long. Is this being addressed?

It is. This has been a focus of extensive conversations I've been having with Kip Hawley, the Secretary of the Transportation Security Administration. We're trying to work together to come up with a program in which business travelers apply to no longer be considered a threat. It's in everyone's interest to make sure that legitimate passengers are processed and handled in an expeditious way, so that we can concentrate on passengers that are a potential threat. People who voluntarily submit to a process where we do a background investigation should be able to become a trusted traveler, and then we can better focus on the bad guys.

What about those leaders in business who have been to the White House many times and have some level of clearance already?

Every time those people go to the White House, they still have to go through the process of getting in, which means a rigorous identification process, submitting to an X-ray machine, and being issued a pass. Even though we may know who these people are,

we can't allow them carte blanche access into the President's office, or his working quarters. Similarly, we have to come up with a system to allow known and respected travelers to gain access to our country expeditiously. We want to facilitate their movement, but at the same time not give up our security.

How will the system work, and how soon will it be implemented?

We're working on it now. It's called the Trusted Traveler Program, and in cooperation with our counterparts around the world, we want to make sure that we have the proper kinds of information that will allow us to expedite legitimate people, products, and cargo across our borders. I'm sure that the people you're talking about, who run large companies, are well aware of the problems associated with getting their products and services moved around the world in this new and enhanced security environment. To address that, we have enacted programs intended to expedite the movement of products and services around the globe.

On the cargo side, we have something called the Customs and Trade Partnership against Terrorism, CTPAT. Companies can join this initiative and work toward easier movement of their products and services. Most of the members are business leaders who are involved in trade, whether it's Wal-Mart, FedEx, or whoever. For example, Wal-Mart ships an incredible number of cargo containers to this country. If we have confidence in Wal-Mart's supply chain, and they are held accountable for everything inside their cargo, then we are able to move it through in an expeditious fashion.

Interestingly, a recent World Bank survey revealed that contrary to the conventional wisdom, which argued that increased security would throw sand into the wheels of commerce, these new measures have actually greased the wheels of commerce by making trade more efficient. Security and free trade do not necessarily have to be in competition with one another. You can have a good strong security system and at the same time facilitate legitimate investigations into the people and goods that are entering our country. I can assure you that the people who read your magazine are the people we want inside. They are our customers. So we're trying to achieve what any company wants to achieve, customer satisfaction. As for travelers themselves, I'm not exactly sure of the timeline for the new measures, but it will be soon.

After you retired from the Secret Service, what drew you back?

I tell people that my wife Judy and I are on our third five-year retirement plan. When I left the Secret Service the first time, it was to go down to the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Georgia, where I was made Director and had a beautiful home on an island. It was exactly what most people would look forward to in their retirement years. We had planned to go down and spend about five years continuing to work and then retire permanently. But then 9/11 happened and after that they asked me to come back to Washington to help start up the Transportation Security Administration, which was an assignment that was very dif-

ficult to say "no" to. So Judy and I decided to go up and help start the TSA, and then retire. About a year or so later, the President asked me to come back as Director of the Secret Service. So we launched on another five-year retirement plan. Then the President asked me to come and be the Commissioner of Customs and Border Protection. Because I felt like I had accomplished what he had asked me to accomplish at the Secret Service, and because he had the confidence in me to come here and help this agency get through the next several years, I was quite willing to do that.

I also felt I could bring some value to the organization based on my experience and background. This is the fourth agency I've managed within the new Department of Homeland Security, so I'm probably somewhat unique in that respect. TSA, the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, the Secret Service, and now Customs and Border Protection are all part of the new agency. I've had a great deal of exposure to and experience with post-9/11 regulations, and I do have a great appreciation for the department's goals and mission, so I felt I could make a difference. I think whenever someone has an opportunity to make a contribution to protecting this nation, they should accept it. I have 12 grandchildren, so I have a huge investment in their future. I really want the country they grow up in to be safe, secure, and open.

Are we more secure today than we were five years ago?

Absolutely. From what I have seen, the result of the President's initiative to develop the DHS and join all the forces that have an impact on this nation's security has had a very positive effect. Unlike in the past, converging all of these elements together under the DHS has resulted in all of us talking to one another on a daily basis about the problems we face, versus us being strung out around three or four different departments, with different chains of command and different reporting structures. It has been a huge success, and the more we succeed, the better this nation is going to be able to go about its business.

This is about our citizens being able to live, work, and worship in a country that is not under constant threat of being attacked, and I think what we have been doing is very positive. Our efforts on the Southwest border are having a huge impact down there. We're seeing it every day. I realize our border initiatives have been controversial, but from my perspective, we've made positive steps towards getting effective control of our borders.

Is there still any overlap in terms of responsibility? For example, under whose jurisdiction does the Coast Guard now fall?

The Coast Guard is under the Department of Homeland Security. They are a sister agency within the department. But the nexus between what the Coast Guard does and what we do here at Customs and Border Protection, you can't separate it. We work together all the time.

A lot of the funds that you need to do the job come from Congress. Are you comfortable that they understand what kinds of resources you need?

I can tell you that in all my 36 years in

government, I have never seen an issue receive as much focus, attention, and support from Congress as homeland security. Republicans and Democrats recognize that our borders are something that we have too long ignored and that it is now time that we get control. Of course there has been disagreement on the methodology, but no one disagrees that it's an absolutely crucial mission. Congress has been very supportive, the administration has been very supportive, and I feel that this is a great opportunity for us to make some very positive moves.

What frustrates you the most?

I think that very same issue: the differences of opinion over how our mission needs to be accomplished. But the final decision the President makes, that's the policy that we will follow.

The President has been bashed a great deal, both by the press and by Congress, especially over the war in Iraq. You were appointed by President Bush, but what do you really think of him?

I am a huge admirer of the President as I was of his father. Obviously, I am carrying out the President's agenda. That's my job. As with any manager in government, it's our job to carry out the agenda of the current administration. He is the leader of the government. He makes the decisions and we need to follow them.

I have tremendous respect for the challenges any President faces and I also recognize what Abraham Lincoln pointed out many years ago, that you can only please some of the people some of the time. The Presidents that I have been around try to make decisions that they think are in the best interest of this country and its people. So I have a tremendous respect for all of them, including Mr. Bush. He's a wonderful individual, and he has a wonderful family. He is also the person I work for, and a professional relationship has to be maintained in order for me to do my job. He may call me his friend, but I don't have the luxury, or the audacity, to call him my friend.

Would you say that most people in government are trying to do the right thing?

I was a career government employee for 35 years and I understand what career employees do for this nation. They are the glue that holds the whole thing together. They are what make the trains run on time, and in many cases, the job involves changing an aircraft engine while the plane is in flight. It's very difficult. But you've got to keep goods, services, and products flowing, and often you're in the midst of tremendous change. You don't have the luxury of stopping and effecting that change and then moving on, you've got to affect that change while you're in the process of providing what the American people expect their government to provide. The good news is, the vast majority of people who come in here, in all the agencies, have total dedication and devotion to the mission. People understand that this is serious business and I have been very impressed with what I have seen in the time I've spent in government. Like anywhere, there are 10 percent who don't care, but my philosophy in leadership is to concentrate on the 90 percent who do. ●