



**United States Senate**  
**Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs**  
Senator Susan M. Collins, Chairman

For Immediate Release

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**Opening Statement**  
**Senator Susan M. Collins**  
**Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs**  
**“Vulnerabilities in the U.S. Passport System can be Exploited by Criminals and Terrorists”**  
**June 29, 2005**

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Today, the Committee will examine an issue that is central to our homeland security: the process for issuing a United States passport. As a new Government Accountability Office report makes clear, this process suffers from several vulnerabilities that could be exploited by terrorists and other criminals.

The U.S. passport is the gold card of travel documents. Governments worldwide treat it as unassailable proof of identity and of citizenship. It opens doors to international travel and expedites re-entry to our country upon return. A fraudulent passport, however, can be a ticket to criminal activity and terrorism.

Technological improvements have made it extremely difficult to counterfeit or alter a U.S. passport, but it is less difficult to obtain an authentic passport by fraudulent means. A common fraud scheme, accounting for 69 percent of cases detected last year according to the State Department, is the use by an imposter of legitimate birth certificates and other identification documents belonging to another during the application process. This scheme is often facilitated by organized fraud rings that can provide the imposter with suitable documents – for a price. One such ring was recently uncovered smuggling hundreds of undocumented aliens from Ecuador and other South American countries into the United States for fees of \$12,000 to \$14,000 each.

And there can be no doubt that fraudulent travel documents are essential to terrorists. As the 9/11 Commission found: “For terrorists, travel documents are as important as weapons. Terrorists must travel clandestinely to meet, train, plan, case targets, and gain access to attack.” The Commission reported on many instances of al Qaeda’s use of fraudulent foreign passports. For example, Ahmed Ressay, an Algerian national who planned to blow up Los Angeles International Airport on January 1, 2000, entered the United States with a Canadian passport in an assumed name. Ressay fraudulently obtained that passport with the assistance of a document vendor who used a blank baptismal certificate stolen from a Catholic Church to create his false identity.

Around the world – in Australia, Indonesia, and South Africa, among other places – governments are investigating passport fraud with clear ties to terrorism. It is not surprising, therefore, that former Secretary of State Colin Powell described maintaining the integrity of the U.S. passport as “a critical component of our global effort to fight terrorism.”

The GAO report that this Committee requested identifies a number of weaknesses in the State Department’s efforts to detect and prevent passport fraud. These include insufficient staffing, training and oversight, and a lack of investigative resources dedicated to stopping passport fraud.

GAO also raises troubling concerns about the State Department's ability to provide adequate oversight of nearly 7,000 passport acceptance facilities throughout the nation, such as local post offices and courthouses, which accept millions of passport applications each year. Last year, the State Department had to stop accepting passport applications from one of these facilities when it learned that a corrupt county employee in New Jersey was aiding passport fraud by selling fraudulent birth certificates to illegal aliens.

Another fundamental flaw uncovered by GAO relates to an issue members of this Committee know all too well – a profound lack of consistent and effective information sharing. The Terrorist Screening Center, which began operating in 2003, has a consolidated watch list database of known or suspected terrorists. GAO reports that the more than 20,000 names of U.S. persons in this watch list were not incorporated into the State Department's Consular Lookout and Support System or "CLASS" database for passports. As the State Department and the TSC have acknowledged, the failure to share this information means that a suspected terrorist could obtain a passport without alerting the appropriate authorities. The fact that one of these individuals has applied for a passport would likely be significant for purposes of a counterterrorism investigation. Moreover, in an appropriate case, the Secretary of State could exercise her legal authority to deny a passport on grounds that a U.S. national's activities abroad are likely to cause serious damage to national security.

The information-sharing problems go beyond the shadowy world of terrorism. The GAO investigation revealed that the State Department's name check system does not have the names of many federal and state fugitives – individuals wanted for such crimes as murder, rape, robbery, and embezzlement. In fact, CLASS contains the names of only 50,000 of the more than 1.2 million federal, state and local fugitives in the United States, less than five percent.

To illustrate the problem the GAO tested the names of 67 fugitives wanted for a variety of serious crimes including murder, felonious assault, and child sex offenses, and found that less than half were in the CLASS system.

These fugitives not in CLASS could apply for and receive a U.S. passport in their own names, and flee the country. In fact, one of the federal fugitives whose name GAO found was not in CLASS did obtain a U.S. passport on May 12, 2004. This was 17 months after the FBI had listed the person in their database as wanted in connection with an \$11 million telemarketing fraud. The fugitive was able to obtain an updated passport from an embassy abroad after his name was cleared in the CLASS database. This occurred despite the fact that there was an outstanding federal warrant for his arrest.

Perhaps most alarming, one of the names tested by GAO and found not to be in the CLASS database was that of Donald Eugene Webb. Mr. Webb, who is wanted in connection with the brutal murder of a police chief in Pennsylvania, appears on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted List. If someone like Mr. Webb could potentially apply for and receive a passport, the prospects of denying passports to possible terrorists are most worrisome. I am pleased, however, that the Committee's investigation has spurred action on this subject. The State Department and the Terrorist Screening Center are making arrangements to share information on Americans on the terrorist watchlist. The State Department has informed us that it is near agreement with the FBI's Violent Crimes Section to gain access to more fugitive data. The Department has also taken steps recently to improve fraud detection training, enhance oversight, and dedicate more resources to fraud investigations. These developments are encouraging, but there is much more to be done.

Protecting the integrity of the U.S. passport is essential to protecting our citizens from those who would do harm to our nation. I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses today as we seek to rebuild its defenses.

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