TSA ADMINISTRATOR DAVID PEKOSKE: IN CONVERSATION

On Tuesday 30th January 2018, at the headquarters of the US Transportation Security Administration in Arlington, TSA Administrator David Pekoske met with Aviation Security International's editor, **Philip Baum**, to discuss some of the current challenges facing US and global aviation security, the achievements of the TSA since its inception and the work that still has to be done to ensure that the skies become even safer and more secure than they are today. ASI is delighted to be able to share with its readership their conversation.

Credit: TSA

PB: *What would you say were the three most significant systemic improvements that have been made to aviation security in the United States since September 11 2001?*

DP: First, the technology of doing screening in the first place. There was a screening process in place, but over the last 16 years, the technology has improved substantially. It has changed across all 450 airports in the United States so that now you have an equivalent level of security no matter where you enter; once you're into the system, you're into the entire system.

Secondly, something that I don't think many people or our compatriot organisations around the world realise about TSA, is that there's a lot more to TSA than the security checkpoint. The security checkpoint is the lion's share of the work we do in terms of resource dollars and numbers of people, and it's certainly the most visible part, but there's an awful lot of what TSA does that actually supports the checkpoint operation. For example, we do vetting of passengers before they even board a flight, so as soon as a passenger purchases a ticket, we have a very robust vetting process that allows us to assess risk based on a passenger's background, and that feeds into the checkpoint operations.

And then in-flight. We have our federal air marshals (FAMS) that provide in-flight security on some flights. But, we also have a programme with the US carriers called the Federal Flight Deck Officer (FFDO) programme, which pilots and co-pilots volunteer for. We provide them with training so they can then carry weapons on board the aircraft to protect the flight deck. So, between the FAMS and FFDOs, there are two added dimensions of in-flight security.

PB: *The last of those systemic improvements you cited is hugely controversial internationally. I've actually been to the FAMS facility in Atlantic City and seen the FFDO training in action, but internationally people are extremely concerned about the idea of pilots being armed. Surely we don't want to introduce firearms into a sterile space?*

DP: Understandably, but I certainly want to have the flight deck crew, if they are willing, to be able to defend the flight deck. At the same time, they are defending the aircraft and the safety of all the passengers that are on board. So, from our perspective, it's a very desirable capability and I'm very comforted to know that we have a pretty robust FFDO programme out there, and they do complement the FAMS that are on flights. That capability on the flight deck is very important.

PB: *What would you say the industry, particularly here in the US, has still failed to address over the 16 years since 9/11?*

DP: We certainly have addressed some things more than we've addressed others, but just about everything that needs to be addressed is in some way, shape or form being addressed.

That said, I think the issue that comes up most often, both internationally and domestically, is the insider threat at airports. As you know, part of the Emergency Amendment/Security Directive process that I issued back in the fall pertained to the insider threat issue at last point of departure airports for flights and routes to the United States and stood for the proposition that we needed to provide more around aircraft security in that process. We have an aviation security advisory committee that advises TSA and is comprised of experts in security, experts in the aviation industry, and experts in airport operations, and I've asked the aviation advisory committee to take another look at the issue. They've looked at the insider threat issue in the past but this issue is dynamic enough that we need to constantly look at it and re-evaluate it. So they're in the process of doing another re-evaluation now.

PB: *It's interesting that you reference the insider threat. If I ask airport security managers what keeps them awake at night, they too tend to say, "the insider threat". Yet how do you rationalise that concern with, say, your comments in response to my opening question regarding vetting people before flights and programmes such as TSA Pre-check? We're doing background checks on people, and then speeding up their process through the checkpoint, yet we don't even really trust the people that are working within the industry who we have done even more extensive background checks on.*

DP We do trust the people we do background checks on. We have a pretty robust process to make sure that folks doing the checks are also trusted individuals. To me, it's a bit of a complementary discussion. You can do a background check on an individual, and that background check can come out good, but that doesn't mean that something won't happen in that individual's life between the time of the background check and the time of the next background check that might cause that person to behave in a way that's different than what we expect based on our past look at that person's history. So part of the process here is, yes, we do background checks, we do vetting of employees, we

do vetting of passengers, we do vetting of aircrew for sure, but we also have an element of security attached to that to be able to detect when something may have happened to somebody.

PB: *So, against that background, are we one disaster away from the United States implementing screening of staff when they go airside at American airports, which is pretty much standard around the rest of the world now? I know you have random checks, but in terms of really identifying staff and putting them through screening processes, what will it take to bring the US in line with the rest of the world?*

DP I don't think of it that way. I hope we don't have a disaster, and my job is to make sure we don't and that we're doing things pro-actively. That's the reason why we initiated another review of the insider issue because there are many ways to ensure that sterile areas are in fact secure. I want to take another look and make sure that as we do this here domestically, we keep asking ourselves whether we are doing enough. Are we doing enough of the right things? Are there some other things that we might be able to do that might have very little to no cost?

> **"...I certainly want to have the flight deck crew, if they are willing, to be able to defend the flight deck..."**

Also, here in the US, there's a lot of infrastructure investment going on right now. I was just up in New York at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey airports - LaGuardia and JFK – where there is major construction underway. A big part of our effort, and that of their owners and operators, is to look at the investment in building new terminals, and building new security checkpoints. Let's build them with security in mind in the first place. For example, you would not now have as many access points as you might have had 20 or 30 years ago. The other thing to keep in mind is here in the US, for a lot of airports, security was an after-thought. Airports were constructed and then we put the security in place so we were constrained in the size of security checkpoints. The whole idea here is that, as we invest in the infrastructure, which is very much needed for a whole host of reasons, security should be part of those initial discussions and the initial design.

PB: *You refer to the checkpoint. The TSA is hugely respected internationally for its work in research and development into new technologies, for the support you give other states, for being a key player, perhaps the leading player on the world stage, and yet there is a lot of criticism internationally of the screening standards in place at US airports compared to the standards at European, Australian and gateway Asian airports. How would you respond to the allegation that, compared to your international partners, the quality of screening delivered by the personnel is really not at the right level yet?*

DP Are you talking about the standards for screening or the actual screening itself?

PB: *The actual screening. Let's put that against the backdrop of the 97% failure rate two years ago. Last year we're looking at something around 80% failure rates of tests. It's a depressing picture.*

DP We do a number of tests here domestically. We do tests inside TSA of our systems at various levels. Sometimes the airports themselves do tests and then we do tests out of headquarters. Separate from that is the Department of Homeland Security Inspector General, which does its own covert tests. Those tests are actually very valuable to us, and what they show to me is that we've got a very strong and adaptive system. It's very difficult to design a system that hits 100% all the time, and as the Administrator what I want to know is, what are my vulnerabilities? Once you identify to me the vulnerabilities that I might not have known about, we go out and pretty quickly try to close those vulnerabilities. I don't think you can rely on just one part of your security operation. You've got to look at all the layers that we provide, all the vetting, all the inspectors that are around airports making sure that the regulations we put in place are complied with, all of the law enforcement folks that are in the airports, all the ticketing agents, all are part of a much larger effort to provide security. These tests sometimes look at single points in the system, and I respect those results, and we respond to those results because we want to close whatever gaps we have, but you also need to look at the thing holistically.

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PB: *But still, do we have the right calibre personnel working for the TSA at the checkpoints? It's not only in the United States; the screeners that are working at checkpoints compared with those that are doing customs inspections or immigration checks – they're paid much less and yet the stakes are so much higher.*

DP: I think we do have the right calibre of personnel. I spent the vast majority of my first six months as the Administrator out at airports, with airlines, with my team, whether it's air marshals or inspectors and I'm very happy with the professionalism overall of the TSA workforce. Let's take a look at the checkpoint by itself for a second: my job is to make sure that I put the right technology tools in the hands of that workforce, that I give that workforce the right procedures to follow that are responsive to the threat that we're facing, and it's also my responsibility to make sure that workforce is trained. Not just trained in an 'on-the-job training' way, but trained in a way that they understand the 'why'. Why is it that we're looking for certain things? Why is this particular issue a threat to us? For myself, if I understand more of the 'whys', I'm going to do a better job. I think the workforce is great. I just think it's my job to make sure that they have the training and the procedures and technology to be able to do that job.

PB: *But perhaps we're too reliant on technology? Perhaps we've gone too far down the route of relying on explosive detection technology when we could use the human brain much more? Considering some of the protocols that are required to clear people who have been identified as selectee passengers, we're often resolving it by asking, "Do they cause an ETD system to alarm?" How do you feel about that?*

DP: I think that the technology that we have collectively around the globe can always be improved. We know – and my international partners know – that there's better technology than what we're currently using and in some locations, airports are further along at putting new technology in place. I don't think it's necessarily reliance on technology, because that presupposes that the current technology stays around. What I'm talking about is putting new technology out there, technology that you can rely on a whole lot more. The new technology that we're contemplating putting out – and that I know many of my international partners are contemplating putting out – detects a much wider range of explosives, for example, and at explosive weights that are significantly lower than what we currently detect. So that technology does get better, but can you rely on technology 100%? No, you can't – you shouldn't – rely on any one thing 100% because there are just so many parts of security that you have to constantly be on alert for anything that might not look right, and not hesitate to check something out if you feel that way. Where can we make the biggest improvement in security performance? I think it is in technology.

PB: *I think it's great that we're now looking at the deployment of Computed Tomography at checkpoints throughout the US, and hopefully internationally, but a lot of that does guard against yesterday's threats, and the existing devices that we know are in production, but it doesn't address the future threats. It doesn't address the chemical/biological weapon threat, it doesn't really address the body bomb, the internally concealed device. So how do we stay ahead of the game and use technology?*

DP: A couple of ways. You're right; CT technology does not get to on-body anomaly detection, but we're working very hard to improve our on-body detection capability. Right now, we have the AIT machines in checkpoints. We're also looking at some other technology that uses a similar technology base, but is a little bit better at detecting them than the current AIT machines. There's a whole suite of technologies that we're examining across the board. I think it's important globally that as I test technologies here in the US and, let's say, my UK partners test technology in the UK, the Aussies, the Canadians, that we all share that information so we don't repeat or relearn each other's lessons. So I might say that I accept the US testing of a certain piece of equipment, and not repeat that test, and say that I'm going to test something that the US hasn't tested to be able to improve [and vice versa]. I do think that we need to look at procedures as well. Procedural changes can make a big improvement. We did that domestically in the US over the last several months and it's made a big difference in our procedures, which we know from our own testing have improved security quite substantially. There are a whole lot of pieces to this and I think we need to look at it as a part of a much bigger puzzle.

PB: *A lot of the drive towards the identification of explosives is very much based on the desire to identify the threat posed by terrorists. But aviation security is not just counterterrorism. Counterterrorism is an element of it, but we also need to be able to identify people who might have psychological problems, people involved in criminal activity. I sense that TSA is very counterterrorism focused.*

DP: I would say that we are focused on every threat. We have greatly expanded our behaviour detection capability. We used to have stand-alone behaviour detection officers, and their only job was to observe passenger behaviours. We don't have that any more. What we've done is make every single person in our security checkpoint trained in behaviour detection to some degree. As you get more and more advanced at the checkpoint, as you become a lead or a supervisory officer, you get even more training so that you can resolve issues. I really want every single one of our transportation security officers to have some elementary behaviour detection because, you're right, if you're just looking for terrorists, you have information of people who might be, or are likely to be, terrorists based on some intelligence, but there's a whole host of other people that certainly present some risk that we need to be alert to and vigilant about. So that's the reason for enhancing the behaviour detection programme.

The other thing that I think is really important here is to use the power of all of our passengers, because the way I look at it, security is

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an 'us' thing. It's not just TSA, or in Canada, security is not just CATSA. Security is everybody that's involved, and that includes passengers and airlines, airports, local law enforcement, gate agents. One of the things that I think is important to emphasise is, for passengers in particular, who are by far the largest number in this whole system – in the US we see over two million every single day – if they're standing next to somebody and they overhear a conversation or they observe some behaviours that make them uncomfortable, we're really encouraging them to report that, and there are very discreet ways of doing so. You don't have to raise your hand and call somebody out in line because that's probably not a very secure thing to do, but you can go to an officer, whether it's a law enforcement officer or a Transportation Security Administration officer and say, "Hey, I observed this, I'm concerned about it." We'll take a look at it. I would really like to increase the 'sensor nodes', if you will. There are a lot of people out there who have information and, for me, if I see somebody in a line that makes me a little uncomfortable, I'm not sure I want to be sitting next to that person on a plane if I haven't revealed what made me uncomfortable to somebody who has the authority to take a look at it.

PB: *Somehow the flight attendants feel like they're the poor relations in the aviation community when it comes to security. That's not just in the USA. There's not much focus on the Annex 6 standards in the same way there is on the Annex 17 standards. Flight attendants, and here I would say in the United States, seem to receive far less training when it comes to security, and more importantly, far less testing – we test our X-ray operators on a regular basis but flight attendants who might be involved in pre-flight checks are very rarely assessed for their abilities when it comes to security, yet they are a key part of the security chain. What more can we do to enhance their role?*

"…we used to have stand-alone behaviour detection officers, and their only job was to observe passenger behaviours. We don't have that any more…"

DP: I couldn't agree more; flight attendants are a key part of the security chain and really flight attendants do get a good deal of training when they become a flight attendant and they get recurrent training to handle situations on board an aircraft in a passenger cabin. I have personally observed flight attendants doing an incredible job at handling some very challenging situations on board aircraft, and of course, as the Administrator, I get reports of what they do day in and day out on board aircraft, so I think they are a critical part of this. We offer training to flight attendants and we make that available to them at no cost.

PB: *But why is it not mandated? Why do they not, for example, have to do physical training to be able to restrain an unruly passenger? Why is it voluntary?*

DP: Part of airline training is to train flight attendants with how to deal with unruly passengers, and of course flight attendants are made aware whenever there is a federal air marshal that's on board the flight for obvious security reasons. They know where that air marshal is and what seat he or she might be sitting in. They are also aware of any other law enforcement officers that are on the flight. So they've got some resources available to them. We've got processes in place to best enable the flight attendants to respond to those situations. I think my transportation security officers

have a very hard job to do, and I think flight attendants have a very hard job to do as well. Whatever we can do at TSA to make that better, to make more training available, more information available to flight attendants.

PB: *We want to have 'common sense security'. A few years ago, TSA spoke publically about rescinding a lot of the restrictions on sharps and yet that had to be put on the backburner for a while. Why? Was that just pressure for flight attendant unions? Will we see that looked at again? It doesn't make sense that we restrict small bladed objects, and yet we can go to an airport duty-free shop, buy a bottle of liquor, smash that and have something far more dangerous in our hands.*

> "…once something gets to be on the prohibited items list, it's very hard to get it off that list…"

DP: Once something gets to be on the prohibited items list, it's very hard to get it off that list. There are all sorts of reasons why groups or individuals would not want to see something taken off. You're right that you could purchase something just as harmful in a retail location inside a sterile area and bring it on board an aircraft. As we deploy better technology, we should be able to get better at figuring out which prohibited items are most critical for us to detect, and which present the greatest harm, and that's really the way I would prefer to look at it – there are certain items on the prohibited items list that I'm really, really concerned about so our detection processes and our training are focused on those and then there are the others that we look at, of course, in the normal course of screening, but we really do need to keep a focus on the most critical ones.

PB: *Looking forward, and you're relatively new in the job, you must have your own initiatives that you would like to champion. What would you say are the initiatives that are currently underway that you think are really worth shouting about from the rooftops?*

DP: A number of initiatives! One is to bring that new technology into the organisation and to be as aggressive as I possibly can in deploying it as rapidly as we can. Going along with that is working with my international partners to find ways to harmonise some standards. I'm going to be taking a very careful look at what would be required in the United States and then what would be required in another country or series of countries, and can we get to a point where we can agree on a set standard. Because I think that's better for manufacturers as it better focuses research and development efforts and, again, works toward standardising a global standard for aviation security. For me, the key priority is to get technology out into the hands of my officers so that we can do an ever better job in security effectiveness.

The other thing I have emphasised from the very first day I was the Administrator is that the most important thing is to be effective in the security mission that we have. I sensed that there was some level of a trade-off between being efficient and being effective and I want to be crystal clear with everyone at TSA that my priority is effectiveness. I view efficiency as throughput at a checkpoint, and that throughput is best described as management of resources, making sure we have the right number of people at the right time at the checkpoint. That is management's responsibility, so I don't want the transportation security officers and TSA to be looking at a long line of passengers and taking a different security process based on wait times. I want them just to do their job and to let the management of the organisation put the right resources in the checkpoint.

When I came to TSA I saw that a really powerful part of the organisation was the great partnerships we have. We have tremendous working relationships with parties that we regulate and that, to me, is not at all uncommon. My background was with the U.S. Coast Guard. The Coast Guard has great relationships with the maritime industry at the same time as regulating them. I think we have found just the right balance in working with our airline and airport partners in that regard, and my goal is to make that even better over time. We are putting together a new strategy for TSA – it should come out in the next month or so – and part of that strategy development process was to bring my industry partners in and say, "Tell me! I'm developing a strategy. What do you see as a stakeholder in TSA's operations that you think we can do differently or better than what we've done in the past?" We got some great input from our industry partners.

But there's good news. In the holiday travel period _– from about a week before Thanksgiving until the week after New Year – we had some record travel days, upwards of 2.6 million plus passengers in the domestic US system. We didn't hear stories about any delays in getting through security, which is pretty remarkable in and of itself, particularly given what I said earlier about being very clear to our officers that they provide security, and to make sure they provide that security. We have put in place new procedures, new ways of scanning the images, new ways of divesting, so we raised security domestically and we had huge volumes of people…and I thought it was very successful. I'm not just saying that to pat TSA on the back – which I think is appropriate because I think my officers did an awesome job, and all our leadership did an awesome job – but really our airline and airport partners are a big, big part of this because there was great co-ordination.

PB: *I just want to pick up on one of those things. You mentioned harmonisation, making sure we can harmonise with international standards. Speaking from an international perspective, what we've seen in the last year is almost anything but! With the PEDs restrictions on certain routes – I know the UK did the same - and the recent cargo requirements. So why are we picking and choosing between routes?*

Philip Baum interviewed TSA Administrator David Pekoske on 30 January 2018

DP: I don't know that we're picking and choosing. I think that some of it is that fortunately – for me ¬and TSA – the U.S. Congress has provided TSA with a wide range of
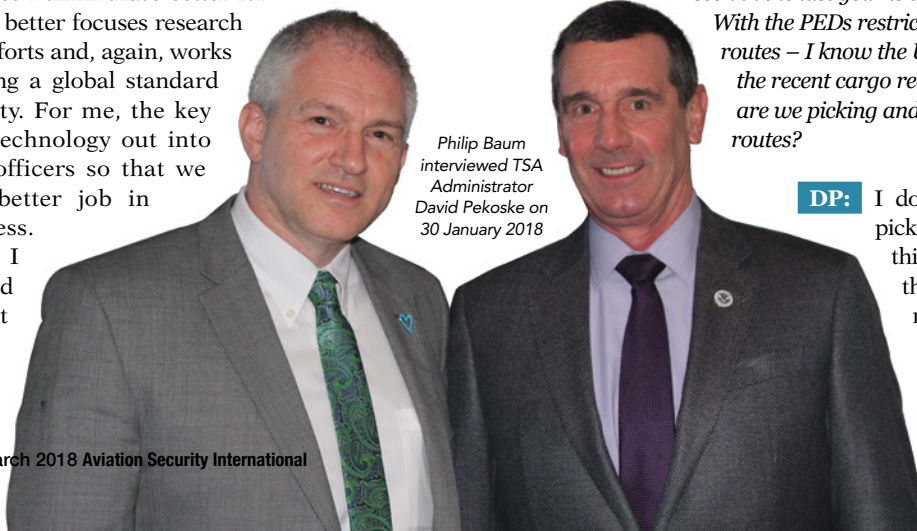
authorities so I have authority to do things based on threats that I see…threats that, perhaps, some of my international counterparts don't necessarily have. So I've got some real tools that the US Congress has given me to make sure that aviation security stays secure. But whenever we do that we coordinate very carefully with our international partners. I don't sit here in Washington D.C., sign an order and then they read it for the first time after it's signed. There's good, robust dialogue back and forth with us and yet, as I look at threats and want to stay ahead of threats, there are certain actions that I just need to take and take relatively quickly. Fortunately, I have the authority to be able to do that.

PB: *Most of the focus is on aviation but of course you are responsible for maritime and for rail. How do you perceive security changing in those areas? Or is it going to take an incident before we see real change?*

DP: The TSA is the Transportation Security – not Aviation Security – Administration, but most of our resources, our people and our dollars, go towards aviation security because the law requires that we provide the aviation security. We're responsible for surface transportation security, and I can regulate surface transportation, but I don't have the requirement to provide it. Only the owners and operators of those systems have the requirement to provide it, and that's where a lot of the cost in security comes from. If you look at TSA aviation security, I have over 60,000 people. Well over 40,000 of that 60,000 are directly providing aviation security, so you can see from that percentage that when you actually have to provide security, it skews the budget comparisons.

One of the things I've seen on the surface side though is that we have a process where we issue guidelines co-operatively with our industries, whether it's the pipeline industry, the over-the-road bus industry, the mass transit industry, light rail, freight rail, we work back and forth to establish these guidelines. We have a very co-operative relationship where a TSA person visits a pipeline company, for example, and looks at what they're doing, matches it against the guidelines, sees where there might be gaps and also sees where they might be exceeding the guidelines and where maybe we can take that practice and put it somewhere else. It's a much more open dialogue. I think with that co-operative relationships, we've made a lot of progress on the surface side. Putting regulations in place, whilst sometimes necessary - and we will where we think it's necessary - is a much longer process and it tends to get punitive sometimes, rather than purely co-operative. I've seen the co-operative relationship on the surface side really benefit us.

PB: *Finally, what keeps you awake at night?*

DP: Two things keep me awake at night: the safety and security of the men and women in TSA. They have a very hard job. They're at some risk in performing that job; at the checkpoint they're dealing with some passengers who may not want to be provided a security service, and so I get concerned about that. And I have air marshals on flights and hopefully nothing ever happens, but I can't assume that so I worry about the safety and security of my workforce who are working around the clock.

And the second thing I worry about is the lone wolf, the self-radicalised individual. We have tremendous intelligence systems, not just here in the United States but globally and there's great information sharing across the board, but we know full well that some people are going to present themselves in a transportation system where no information is available to us that they pose a particular threat. That's why it's so important that not just TSA and our law enforcement partners be vigilant on this, but our passengers – because passengers might in fact see behaviour that's of concern before we do.