Remarks by the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security & Counterterrorism
Ms. Frances Fragos Townsend

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MARY MARGARET GRAHAM: Good afternoon everybody. For those of you who don't know me – and I'll make a reprise visit tomorrow afternoon – I'm Mary Margaret Graham, the deputy DNI for collection.

It's a great pleasure for me to introduce our next speaker who basically, I'm sure, needs no introduction, to those of you who live in Washington or those of you who live in the Homeland Security community. Frances Fragos Townsend was appointed to her current position as homeland security advisor by the president in May of 2004. Her official title, of course, is the assistant to the president for homeland security and counterterrorism.

Fran and I have known each other for a long time. Our paths have crossed several places. She is first and foremost one of the biggest supporters of the intelligence community and the work that it does. She is also one of the best people that we have in evaluating on how we're doing. A key part of how we're doing our business today, and I would argue, in the future, is how we make use of open-source information. So when we began to think about getting this conference together, Fran was one of the first people we thought of. And luckily, her schedule and our schedules matched.

So without further ado, I'd like to introduce Fran Townsend.

(Applause.)

FRANCES FRAGOS TOWNSEND: Mary Margaret, thank you for that kind introduction, and thank you to the open source center for inviting me here today to participate in your first annual DNI Open Source Center conference.

First, let me say that the DNI Open Source Center, or OSC, is one of our intelligence reform success stories. Building on the strong foundation of the CIA's foreign broadcast information service, the OSC is a vital component of the intelligence community and of our national security enterprise. The OSC is also a strong example of strategic leadership by the DNI who chose to establish, support, and grow an important community resource within a single existing intelligence agency.

Open source information is playing an increasingly prominent role in our homeland security and counterterrorism activities. Media sources are often where we get our first reports of significant world events. These media tip-offs cue clandestine collection efforts and immediate protective response measures.

For example, homeland security officials in Vermont and New York became aware of a potential security issue through media reporting in Canada last February. The media reports focused on Al Qaeda's possible interest in targeting Canadian oil and natural gas facilities as part of a plot to deny the U.S. access to major oil suppliers. This prompted Vermont and New York Homeland Security officials to reach out to Canadian counterparts to determine what additional security measures might be needed, and to learn more about the threat.

In addition to shoring up local security measures, this exchange had the added benefit of establishing new channels of communications on both sides of the border. Open source information also plays an indispensable role in understanding the terrorists who continue to pose a threat to the homeland. Much of what is known about our enemies is derived from their own statements, blogs, videos, and chat sessions on the Internet. The OSC does a superb job of gathering this information and providing early and accurate translations of messages directed at the U.S. by terrorists. The OSC posts these translations on an Internet-accessible website available to federal, state, and local officials and others, including police departments such as the NYPD.

Certain information about the plans and capabilities of a secretive enemy like Al Qaeda must be collected through expensive and often dangerous clandestine means. But a remarkable amount of information is increasingly available – openly available – in their own words, posted on the Internet or broadcast over radio and television, all of which are exploited by the OSC or OSC partners including the Department of Defense, State, Homeland Security, STRATCOM, and various private sector organizations.

On a daily basis, I rely heavily on the unclassified information collected and analyzed by the OSC on a wide range of homeland security and counterterrorism issues. Intelligence analysis presented to the president in his morning briefings often includes purely open source products. Increasingly, open source information provides unique insights into high priority topics. And in fact, what we know about some topics, such as avian flu, is primarily gathered from open sources.

Our understanding on issues as complex and diverse as political developments in Russia, the spread of democracy in Asia and the Middle East, and Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons have all been informed by open source materials. It is important to note that the open source world, especially the Internet, is also a key battlefield in the war on terror. The terrorists use it to communicate for the purposes of fundraising, spreading propaganda, training, and recruiting.

To win the war on terror, we must be present in this battle space and understand the hateful ideologies supporting their criminal acts. The work of the OSC and others identifying and tracking thousands of jihadist websites, and translating posted materials is critical to our understanding of the enemy and thwarting their plans. As we saw in the recent U.K. plot, this enemy hides in plain sight. They live and work amongst us, waiting patiently as operational attack plans are developed. Integrating open source information with classified intelligence will continue to be critical in detecting and disrupting their plots.

It is also central to our strategy for the long struggle in the war of ideas. For example, OSC supports the work of Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes who is charged with promoting America's values and confronting the ideological support for terrorism around the world.

Open source information has long been important to the work of the intelligence community. For analysts, open source materials provide cultural and other contextual information useful in evaluating and interpreting classified intelligence reports. These materials also assist in identifying social and political trends relevant to national security issues. In short, open source information is an essential building block for analysis.

Open source information supports the work of the U.S. government more broadly as well. It often serves as a starting point for diplomatic negotiations and for national security policy deliberations. Publicly available information can be useful in prompting bad actors to convey significant details on threats. A U.S. Army sergeant recently told us that in Iraq, sometimes it was the OSC on classified products that did the job in tricking an insurgent into spilling his beans.

Since the standup of the center, OSC's Internet accessible website, opensource.gov, has doubled its number of active customers, which extend literally from the White House to local police departments, as I mentioned, like the NYPD. This is an excellent example of improved information sharing, not only across the intelligence community, but across the government.

In recent years, an increased emphasis on open source collection has yielded new electronic search and link analysis tools. For example, OSC has a new robust system to collect, store, and make available videos from around the globe to government customers. These capabilities make it easier to access and integrate information and enables us to connect the dots on the terrorist threat related information in new and innovative ways.

The OSC's emphasis on translation capabilities has also been significant, resulting in more accurate, reliable, timely translations in difficult languages. Working at the confluence of perhaps the world's two most dynamic industries – media and information technology – policymakers rely on organizations like OSC to keep them abreast of new and emerging sources of influence like social media, citizen media, and mobile media. OSC has helped us to appreciate the power and direct role of new media in shaping and influencing events.

Many of you here today are actively contributing to building and perfecting our open source capabilities. These tools and services are providing critical support to homeland security activities and you are making a difference in the war on terror. The American people want to play an active role in homeland security, and they are doing so everyday. As a nation, we demand to know what threats are out there and how we can help. In response, and as part of a concerted strategy, we are increasingly leveraging publicly available information as a source and as a basis for an increased exchange of views and sharing of information among government officials and with the American public.

Some of our most useful leads come from everyday Americans. After all, we remember it was a store clerk in New Jersey who alerted local authorities when he saw something suspicious that ultimately resulted in the thwarting of the Fort Dix plot in May of 2007. Publicly available information is playing an increasingly prominent role in our homeland security activities. The power of open source information is limitless and reflects the many great strengths of our great nation. It will only continue to grow in volume and significance as the Information Age advances.

With your good work, we will harness this power to improve the safety and security of the American people and to protect American values and our way of life. This conference today is an important part of the process. I thank you for the good work you are doing, and I look forward to a continued wonderful relationship with the OSC.

(Applause.)

MS. GRAHAM (?): Ms. Johnson, thank you so much for your excellent remarks today. And on behalf of the director of National Intelligence, I'd like to present you with a small thank you for coming today. Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

(END)