Maritime Domain Awareness: 
the Key to Maritime Security

Dana A. Goward1

Maritime security is burdened by thousands of years of history and tradition.

We in the Coast Guard are reminded of this truism on a daily basis. One particularly poignant reminder came in October of 2002, a scant thirteen months after the 9/11 attacks. In the middle of a weekday afternoon, a fifty-foot long boat pulled up near the Rickenbacker Causeway in Miami, Florida and offloaded 220 illegal aliens directly into the heart of downtown. Naturally, a news helicopter was overhead and the event was almost instantly broadcast nationwide.2 The US Coast Guard is supposed to play a leading role in preventing these kinds of incidents, and the Commandant of the Coast Guard at the time, Admiral Thomas Collins, ended up briefing the Secretary of Transportation. After he was told of the incident, the Secretary, in some disbelief, asked Admiral Collins, “How in the world did they get through?” The Admiral’s reply was “Sir, with all due respect, how did they get through what?”

This is an amusing story for those of us in the maritime community because we have long known and accepted the openness and vulnerabilities of our many port and coastal areas. It should be an instructive story for us as well,

1 Captain Dana A. Goward, US Coast Guard (Ret.), Director, Maritime Domain Awareness, Program Integration, US Coast Guard. Reprinted from Proceedings with permission; Copyright (c) 2007 U.S. Naval Institute/ www.navalinstitute.org The author’s PowerPoint presentation may be viewed on the accompanying CD.
2 For a report of the incident as it was occurring, see CNN.com, Haitian Refugees Jump Ship and Walk to Shore, http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0210/29/bn.02.html (last visited, Feb. 28, 2007).
though, as it makes two important points. First, it dramatically reminds us of the vulnerability of these crucial parts of our transportation and economic systems. Our ports are essential transshipment nodes that are responsible for 95 percent of our trade. Many are highly specialized; all have high concentrations of expensive, difficult to replace infrastructure. Most ports are in population centers—and all are economic engines. Yet security has often been seen as an expensive obstacle, rather than an essential contributor, to the long-term, uninterrupted free flow of commerce.

Second, the incident in Miami, and the Secretary of Transportation’s reaction, tell us that we maritime professionals fall far short of the expectations of government leaders and the populations they represent. The great majority of our leaders and citizenry are landsmen with no maritime experience at all. They are familiar with air travel, as a large portion of the population has traveled at least once by airplane. They know from movies and television that aircraft, airports, and the skies are monitored by radar operators, and that aircraft off course or in trouble can be quickly identified and assisted. Their experience at airports tells them that the flow of air traffic is orderly, efficient, fairly secure, and much the same from one place to the next. Because few have experience with maritime transportation, they unconsciously assume—and expect—that the kind of orderliness and security they see in aviation also exists at seaports and on the ocean. When they discover to the contrary, they are disappointed and often wonder why it is that the maritime community has not entered the modern age.

A part of the answer is again that maritime security is burdened by thousands of years of history and tradition. Unlike aviation, which sprang to life as we know it today in less than a hundred years and which has a coherent, relatively complete architecture of policies and supporting systems, maritime practices have evolved over centuries. Maritime policies and supporting systems