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Fireside Chat with Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas, 7th Secretary, U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Moderator: Trymaine Lee, MSNBC Correspondent

Trymaine Lee: Thank you very much. Is this the chlorophyll winter I've been hearing about? I'm at 85% now, the altitude has me a little woozy. [00:00:30] Hey, how's it going? So, first of all, thank you all for joining us here today. I'm really excited about this conversation we're going to have with Secretary Mayorkas. My name is Trymaine Lee, again, I'm a correspondent with NBC News and MSNBC. Before we get into the meat of our conversation, I want to give you a little background on the secretary.

So first, Secretary Mayorkas was born in Havana, Cuba and immigrated to the United States as a refugee in 1960, settling with his family in Southern California. [00:01:00] He went on to graduate from Loyola Law School and work as an assistant US attorney in the Central District of California for nearly a decade. He then became the youngest US attorney in the country before serving in the Obama administration as the Director of US Citizenship and Immigration Services until 2013. He previously worked as Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security, helping to implement the DACA program. In 2021, he was confirmed by the Senate to lead the department. He's the first Latino and [00:01:30] first immigrant to ever hold the position. Secretary Mayorkas has headed up the department at a time of immense turmoil in the United States, from issues of immigration and border protection to cyber security and the rise of domestic terrorism and white supremacist violence. In this very critical moment, it's an honor and a privilege to have this conversation with you. Thank you so much for joining us, Secretary Mayorkas.

Secretary Aleja...: Well, thank you so much. Thank you. [00:02:00] The honor is mine. Trymaine, thanks for the kind introduction. You mentioned that I came here to the United States as a refugee, and I'd like to just share something with everybody if I may, because my identity as a refugee was very much a part of my upbringing. My parents really wanted me and my sister to understand what displacement [00:02:30] meant.

And so, I understood myself to be a refugee from Cuba, political refugee. And then when I was a US citizenship in immigration services, I traveled to Nairobi, Kenya. And from Nairobi, we took a small plane to the refugee camp of Dadaab, which was on the Kenyan-Somali border. It was designed for 90,000 people, and there were 300,000 people [00:03:00] there at the time. I could not describe the individuals as poor, as poor suggests that you have something, just not enough. These human beings had nothing. I sat in an interview conducted by one of our refugee affairs officers with a family of six parents and four children who were hoping to reach Nairobi and ultimately to [00:03:30] the United States. The questions first were directed to the 17-year-old daughter, the oldest of the four children, and our refugee affairs officer asked her where she was born. She looked puzzled and she

said, "I was born here." She had known nothing else but sleeping on the sand with either a paper or a plastic bag [00:04:00] over her head as shelter.

I came home, and it was very difficult for me to define myself as a refugee after that. I don't think that when one speaks of refugee that means different things in different parts of the world and captures different circumstances. It shook my sense of identity, [00:04:30] and how I translate that into our work is the decisions we make, the policy decisions that we make really do say something about not only who we are, our identity, but who we want to be. And that's a really important thing to keep in mind.

Trymaine Lee: Being the first Latino secretary, and you say that you've evolved [00:05:00] from your identity as a refugee to something much more, is there pressure to identify one way or the other? Is there other allegiances that are being pressed?

Secretary Aleja...: I think no, I don't. I think there might be expectations of me in the immigrant community. I am to a great extent aligned with the expectations. They match my ambitions for what we want [00:05:30] to do. They reflect, I think, the president's ambitions for what our country needs and who we are, but there are many different pressures from many different stakeholders. Our job is to accomplish them all through the mission.

Trymaine Lee: Especially in this last several weeks, it feels like America is anything but secure. It feels as if we are fraying at the edges, and often it's [00:06:00] violently. They're old threats and new threats, but I want to ask you, sir, what is the biggest threat to our security and safety in America today?

Secretary Aleja...: Well, I would answer that in a couple ways. We were designed as a department to address the threat of foreign terrorism. Back when the department was created, our greatest threat was the individual who wanted to come to the United States and do damage born of a foreign terrorist [00:06:30] ideology. That transitioned to the homegrown violent extremist, the individual already resident in the United States who was drawn to violence by reason of that same foreign terrorist ideology. Now we have what we call domestic violent extremism or domestic terrorism. Individuals here are perhaps motivated by strings of communication from abroad but drawn [00:07:00] to violence because of an ideology of hate, false narratives, personal grievances, other communications propagated on social media, other online platforms. From a terrorism perspective, I think domestic violent extremism is one of the greatest terrorism-related threats that we face in the homeland. I also think the divisiveness in our country is a [00:07:30] threat. I think it is a threat that is exploited by our foreign adversaries.

Trymaine Lee: How much of the rise in domestic terrorism that we've seen in recent years, how much do you play squarely on the backs of politicians who are stirring this toxic environment?

Secretary Aleja...: I'm going to pull back from politics for a minute and just [00:08:00] speak of the divide, to speak of the fact that, in my view, there has been more space given than I can remember for hate and the overt expression of it. I am deeply concerned that the overt expression of hate propagates more hate.

Trymaine Lee: [00:08:30] What about the role of white supremacy and white supremacist ideology? I just got back from Buffalo last week where they reopened the Tops grocery store where the massacre occurred and to see this community grappling under the full weight of a white supremacist violence and feeling as if there's no one there to step in and try to prevent these kinds of mares from

happening. I want to ask you, has the DHS done anything [00:09:00] to curb the growth of white supremacy? The DHS didn't, until 2019, name it a top priority. And so, is there anything that could be done to stem the white supremacist violence we're seeing?

Secretary Aleja...: So, Trymaine, I think it's very important to explain what our role is, because the expression of white supremacy, however arduous we [00:09:30] might consider it to be, is an ability that individuals have to express under the First Amendment. We do not get engaged when ideologies of hate are expressed, but it is the connectivity between the expression of an ideology and violence that prompts our involvement. I think that's a very important distinction [00:10:00] to draw.

Trymaine Lee: Well, on that note, for a very long time we were telling people, "If You See something, Say Something." But what if that saying something is a brother who's in chat rooms, if it's a nephew or an uncle who is involved in activities with militia groups?

Secretary Aleja...: I think that question is such an important question, and we are very focused on it right now, because it is my fundamental belief that If You See Something, Say Something speaks of the [00:10:30] abandoned backpack in an airport. It doesn't speak to the friend, the relative, the community member who sees someone in their neighborhood exhibiting signs that reflect a dissension of that individual down a path that could be very dangerous. The response to that requires a holistic [00:11:00] effort. See Something, Say Something is call law enforcement and bring that method of prevention to bear. But will a parent call law enforcement if they see a problem with their child? Is it the accountability regime that will draw them to seek assistance, or is it a support and help regime [00:11:30] that will? And so, we're working on an analog to See Something, Say Something, and we're doing quite a bit as well with the Department of Health and Human Services, with the Department of Education, with states and local communities. We disseminate information, and we're building a resource center for people to understand how to identify reasons for concern and then what to do about [00:12:00] it .

Trymaine Lee: To that point, should we be reconsidering how we think about the traditional lone wolf gunman? When we know that folks are operating in online spaces and community groups, we're not only being egged on, but they're being weaponized in so many ways.

Secretary Aleja...: Well, so here again, we draw that line between expressions and calls for violence. What we do is we access publicly-available information. We [00:12:30] access work done by academic and nonprofit organizations and we call upon our partner agencies, federal, state, and local, to gather information to understand what the threat landscape is, to understand what is being communicated. Is there a call to action, whether it be to respond to a [00:13:00] civil expression of protest, is it to react to a decision-maker's home to threaten their lives? Whatever the reason might be, we need to understand the threat landscape and communicate, disperse what we have learned to local communities, because it is the frontline that is usually the one called upon to respond.

Trymaine Lee: When we think about the colliding of ideas and just talk, [00:13:30] protected speech and actions, I can't help but think about January 6th. I wonder if in your estimation January 6th was an act of domestic terrorism.

Secretary Aleja...: Maybe somebody will be able to answer this question whether the Department of Justice has declared it to be so, but I will tell you that identifying it as an act of domestic terrorism has legal implications, so I'm going to skirt by that. I will tell you this: because [00:14:00] I grew up in an extraordinarily patriotic home profoundly so because of what this country gave to us, I remain in

disbelief that this country does not unify in condemnation of what occurred on January 6th. And that speaks of the acuity of the divide and why I consider it to be of [00:14:30] concern from a security perspective.

I want to be clear, I'm almost at 18 months in my tenure, and I have not in all those 18 months received three different applauses. I'm actually thinking of sprinting off stage very soon.

Speaker 3: There's the applaud sign up here.

Secretary Aleja...: [00:15:00] Thanks very much.

Trymaine Lee: But now you've been around the block for a while, right, are you shocked and surprised at the response? Are you actually surprised or lack of?

Secretary Aleja...: Almost 18 months in seeing what we see and doing what we do, the only thing that surprises me is that sometimes I continue to be surprised. It is remarkable to see [00:15:30] what people can do to one another. We are on the frontlines of battling child sexual exploitation online. It is remarkable to see what people can do to one another. And then it is remarkable to see the resilience of the human spirit and what people can pick themselves up from and how [00:16:00] they can move forward, and frankly, do great things.

Trymaine Lee: I heard a woman say once, and completely different context, it was about gun violence in the black community, and it was about always describing black people as resilient, right, but resiliency, you're bending and bending and bending, but you're going to break at some point. Are we at this point in America where we are on the verge of breaking something fundamental?

Secretary Aleja...: So Trymaine, when you mention [00:16:30] the black community and responding to gun violence, resilience is not the first thing that comes to mind. Some more endemic infirmities come to mind. The fact that we require people to be resilient when they're trying to live, resilience is not the first thing that comes to mind.

Trymaine Lee: But we're also asking America to be resilient and weather...

Secretary Aleja...: Resilience is an [00:17:00] extraordinarily important human quality because we all face challenges individually, collectively as a nation. And so, resilience is important. The emergency management arena, it's preparation, prevention, response, and resilience.

Trymaine Lee: Back to January 6th for a moment. [00:17:30] We saw the collusion of various groups with different ideologies coming together for the first time in a very long time. We had white nationalists, we had conspiracy theorists all coming together for a common goal. I wonder what that signals to you, this idea that groups who had never really been on the same page before but now are finding common ground.

Secretary Aleja...: That is not the commonality that we aspire to. There was a presidential historian [00:18:00] who said, speaking of January 6th and what drew people to it and what were intending to do, at least some were intending to do, it was very, very sobering, he said, "Please remember that American democracy is still an experiment. And it is a very relatively young experiment when we take a look at the history of the [00:18:30] world." There were people who marched on and broke into the capital who were angling to potentially kill the vice president of the United States and the speaker of the house. We just have to keep that in mind in understanding this is what the historian said, the fragility of our experiment, [00:19:00] and perhaps adding to it, the importance of resilience.

Trymaine Lee: And in investigating what happened on January 6th, the January 6th Committee requested a trove of documentation from the Secret Service. Reports indicate that dozens and dozens

and dozens of text messages have disappeared. I wonder what you know about the nature of those text messages being deleted when you found out. [00:19:30] The implication is troubling for a lot of people.

Secretary Aleja...: Yeah. So, already much has been reported about it, and correctly so and importantly. The Secret Service had commenced a migration of systems. I will say that the Secret Service remains committed to cooperating fully with the committee, and I think there's something just underlying all of this that we [00:20:00] have to keep in mind. We need to know exactly what happened on January 6th and the days leading up to it and the days following it. That is the commitment of the Secret Service and that is also the direction they have received. They will continue to cooperate and communicate with the committee.

Trymaine Lee: Secretary, there would be a lot of people who say, "Sounds really convenient." There's merging of information and all [00:20:30] these possibly important text messages just disappear. Do you believe that this was just a good faith accident?

Secretary Aleja...: The migration was planned well before January 2021. I think the facts will be disclosed, and we will address the facts as they are learned or continue to be learned, and we'll learn from it and do what we need to do.

Trymaine Lee: [00:21:00] I don't mean to be hyperbolic at all, and I don't use word references lightly or easily, but experts who study civil wars and the conditions that create them say that America is stepping dangerously close to those conditions. Do you believe that we are stepping dangerously close to the conditions that create civil war?

Secretary Aleja...: I'm an optimist, so I would say no. But at the very same time, I return to what I articulated at the outset, which is that the [00:21:30] divisiveness in this country creates risk. In that divide come foreign adversaries who exploited, who spread disinformation to drive people's behavior, who exacerbate the divide, and who have the interest [00:22:00] in our weakness and our downfall. I put it starkly because I think that's accurate.

Trymaine Lee: I know you were in Uvalde not long after the shooting. That community, not unlike Buffalo, is still struggling to get back on its feet after a truly horrific incident. And day by day we're learning more about what officers did and what they didn't do that day. I want to [00:22:30] ask you about a statement you gave shortly after the massacre, where you described border patrol officers who without hesitation put themselves between the shooter and students to end the bloodshed. I wonder, given what you know now, standing here today, how would you describe the actions of officers under your purview, the border patrol agents?

Secretary Aleja...: So look, a few things. First of all, first and foremost, I did travel to Uvalde [00:23:00] to pay respects to the victims. I, at the request of a family that has a relationship with the customs and border protection, attended a viewing. I cannot overstate the difficulty of seeing parents suffering a combination of [00:23:30] unlimited grief and uncontrolled anger. I also visited the personnel of customs and border protection and Homeland Security Investigations that responded, that went through the door into the [00:24:00] classroom and neutralized the assailant. These border patrol agents had to leave the school, return to their station, change their clothes, and go back to the school. We're going to continue to learn facts, Trymaine, but I [00:24:30] have extraordinary admiration for our boarder patrol and what they do every single day.

Trymaine Lee: How do you balance that? These are your officers who witnessed the unthinkable, the unimaginable, but on the other side, the expectation that these officers do their job by their training. How do you strike a balance in being there while also doing whatever you can to fix all the broken pieces systemically that led to what we saw?

Secretary Aleja...: [00:25:00] I mean, that's what we do, and that's what everyone should want us to do, including those who participate. We learn. We learn from those who act bravely. We learn from the mistakes that we make. I say to people we shouldn't shrink from criticism, we should work very, very hard [00:25:30] not to deserve it. People say to me very often, "Well, you've got the toughest job." I visited the personnel of border patrol. Well, I was wearing a polo shirt and khakis, but I didn't have to go back to my station to take off my [00:26:00] blood-soaked uniform with the blood of carnage of children. I have pressures in my job. One of the significant pressures is to equip those individuals with the tools and resources and training and capabilities that they need to do theirs. I mean, it's worlds of difference and difficulty.

Trymaine Lee: [00:26:30] I want to ask you again about white supremacy in this country, and I want to ask you to what extent have white supremacists infiltrated law enforcement that falls on your purview?

Secretary Aleja...: We conducted a study. I directed a study internally, and it was very instructive to learn it was really a domestic violent extremism [00:27:00] of whatever type. It was not white supremacy exclusively. We didn't have a common definition of domestic violence extremism, nor did we have processes or systems that enabled us to identify it and address it appropriately. So we have been, since the months I received those results, in building the definitions, developing the definitions and building the processes. [00:27:30] You know, what's interesting is that the license to articulate a particular ideology is more nuanced than I understood it to be. It can be for example, dependent upon one's position. So if one is in the back room of an office and doing paperwork, perhaps one can be rather overt in expressing [00:28:00] one's anti one's xenophobic views. But if one is on the front lines of immigration and that impairs one's objectivity, or other's perception of one subjectivity, then one might not have as great a license to be expressive. It gets very nuanced, but we are building that because that is just [00:28:30] a fundamental element of integrity. As an institution, we should have those definitions, we should have those processes, we should have those systems.

Trymaine Lee: That might not give a lot of people confidence that those who are tasked with rooting out white supremacy in this country might also be compromised by what is essentially a very dangerous, violent ideology.

Secretary Aleja...: That's why the obligation to do what we're doing is so important. But remember, we're not rooting out white [00:29:00] supremacy, we're rooting out the violent manifestation of it.

Trymaine Lee: We treat white supremacy in this country as if it's a feature not a function. Do you believe that white supremacy is hardwired in this country, baked in the fabric?

Secretary Aleja...: If I said yes to that, boy, would that be a gloomy view of our country.

Trymaine Lee: Do you not believe that?

Secretary Aleja...: That it is hardwired? [00:29:30] What does hardwired mean?

Trymaine Lee: That's its a fundamental part of the way this country operates, is the way it infiltrates all the institutions including, say, law enforcement.

Secretary Aleja...: The way I understand your question Trymaine is that... Are you asking me, is it an inherent quality of our country? Absolutely not. Is it something that some people [00:30:00] in this country believe, some people teach to future generations? Absolutely. But do I think it's an inherent part of our country? It is certainly a part of our history from inception, but does that mean it is a part of our fabric...

Trymaine Lee: [00:30:30] I definitely didn't want to set your future in any trouble. I really [inaudible 00:30:35].

Secretary Aleja...: No, no, no, I have to think about that. Because if I say no, you're probably going to think, or some people would think, that, "Wow, empirically, what are you basing that on?" And I might be basing it on hope rather than the past.

Trymaine Lee: [00:31:00] It's been pretty gloomy conversation so far. On a much lighter note, we were talking earlier about good days and bad days. I wonder, in your line of work, right, you have white supremacists and mass shootings, what does a good day look like for you?

Secretary Aleja...: In one way or another, every day, and I'll tell you why, [00:31:30] because the Commandant of the United States Coast Guard is here, Linda Fagan. By the way, the first woman to lead a service in the United States. Often described incorrectly as a great woman leader. A great leader who's a woman.

Kristie Canegallo [00:32:00] is here, Marsha Espinosa, Erin Waters, Kay Fallon, Secret Service agents. We work with such great people that at many points every day, it's a great day. People ask me, "What keeps you up at night?" [00:32:30] I was asked a question, "In this job, learning what I learn, seeing what I see, reading what I read, do I feel more unsafe?" And working with the people I do, I feel safer. The challenges are there. It's just the extraordinary talent and dedication of people.

Let me tell you a story because we do so many great things. I was at Fort Lee [00:33:00] as part of Operation Allies Welcome, bringing more than 80,000 Afghans to the United States in under three months. Historic effort across the administration. An individual who had served in Afghanistan is now at US Citizenship and Immigration Services, and he was completing the paperwork for [00:33:30] a work authorization for one of the Afghan nationals. That Afghan national was his interpreter 15 years earlier in Afghanistan. We do great things. And by the way, that family in Nairobi in the United States. I could count a million things [00:34:00] every day.

Trymaine Lee: Speaking of families, you chair the Biden administration's Family Unification Task Force. Can you give us an update of where things are? I mean, we all remember seeing those images of the family separated. It's been a while since we heard anything about these children and their families.

Secretary Aleja...: Quite a number of them that were already present in the United States, albeit separated, were able to unite themselves. We [00:34:30] have united more than, I think it's now 350 families with parents who had been removed to their countries of origin. And we're not going to stop until we reunite every single one of them. What I've learned, not to return to the difficulties, but is that reunification is not only physical. Because I met with a number of reunited families, [00:35:00] and one of the mothers was expressing how the trauma continues because her 16-year-old daughter still felt separated and couldn't understand how her mother could allow it to happen, when in fact we did it. And so, the work is a physical reunification and [00:35:30] support and providing them with stability. I

do hope that Congress passes law that allows them to gain status to bring stability to their lives because we can only do it temporarily.

Trymaine Lee: Speaking of the border, is the border safe now? I was watching a news channel, and they were talking about an invasion was happening, and I got a little concerned.

Secretary Aleja...: Look, [00:36:00] the border is secure. We are working to make the border more secure. That has been a historic challenge. I have said to a number of legislators who expressed to me that we need to address the challenge at the border before they pass legislation. I [00:36:30] take issue with the math of holding the solution hostage until the problem is resolved. There is work to be done. Safe and secure are two different words. There are smugglers that operate on the Mexican side of the border, and placing one's life in their hands is not safe.

Trymaine Lee: [00:37:00] I know we talked about shifting from a focus on foreign terrorism to domestic terrorism, but what is the gravest foreign threat we face today in your estimation?

Secretary Aleja...: Well, I think there's still the foreign terrorist threat, that is while the threat has evolved on the homeland, it doesn't mean that the prior iterations have disappeared. Others have gained in prominence, but that remains a serious threat. [00:37:30] Cybersecurity is a tremendous threat that we face, not just ransomware, but criminal enterprises and nation states, actors. Neuberger and I, the Deputy National Security official who's really leading in the national security space, our country's [00:38:00] cybersecurity efforts quite fortunately for all of us, we were talking about how originally cybersecurity was viewed in the context of espionage and counter-espionage. But then we saw it evolve to where cybersecurity is used as an extraordinarily disruptive force. That's a grave threat.

Trymaine Lee: Secretary Mayorkas, I couldn't imagine a better way to spend [00:38:30] this evening than with you and all of you. So thank you so much for your time.

Secretary Aleja...: Thank you. Thank you.

Speaker 4: Thank you so much. Well, thank you all. That was a masterclass in a really heartfelt, open, honest interview, and a great way to kick us off. Now, all of you who are participants in the Aspen Security Forums, speakers, journalists, please join us. [00:39:00] We're going to walk through the beautiful campus over to Doerr-Hosier, and all say hello to each other over a well-deserved drink. Thank you.