Janet Napolitano ’83 shares insights from her tenure as secretary of the Department of Homeland Security in her first book, “How Safe Are We?” Kirkus Reviews calls the book, published in the spring, “A clear-eyed, rational examination of a government office that plays a key and often misunderstood role in the lives of all Americans.”

The book is mostly a positive affirmation of her role, but in 2009-10, and includes a substantial section titled “What We Got Right.” She makes the case that the nation’s borders and air space are more secure because of measures DHS took to decrease the statistical chances of a successful terrorist attack.

But she also addressed missteps, and added, “Well, I’m not the most famous gal. After Omar Farouk Abdulmutallab’s unsuccessful attempt to set off plastic explosives in his underwear on a Christmas Day Flight in 2009, a fatigued and dumbfounded Napolitano gave a regrettable quote.

“I was holding my own until I made the last interview of the morning, with CNN’s Candy Crowley,” she said in the book, “and in my exhaustion telecopied the message into three paragraphs, one word bigger than the one in front of it and we never had the chance to fix it. I just got chided on my doorstep: ‘The system worked.’

‘Of course, the system hadn’t worked. I knew that. Everyone knew that.’

She recounts how President Barack Obama handled that short interview. In a meeting with her peers, he emphasized that he would hold her and others personally accountable for any further problems. But privately, he was compassionate.

“We all make mistakes,” Janet,” she recalls him saying, and “I am not the only one who needs to help us come up with a better system.”

She concludes the section, “Where We Need to Improve,” which looks at potential cyberattacks and threats due to a rapidly changing climate, as examples.

Near the end of the book, she critiques aspects of the current administration’s handling of security matters, prompted by the false-alarm alert issued in Hawaii of a pending missile attack. The alerts prompted by the false-alarm alert issued in Hawaii of a pending missile attack.

“Eventually, we got it right,” the book says. “But not before four days of very bad press, a stock market meltdown, and a million randy people in Hawaii.”

Janet Napolitano is currently president of the University of California system.

—Eric Williamson