

Notable Speech

Responding to Terrorism

By FBI Director Robert S. Mueller III

As Mayor Marc Morial indicated, I started as FBI director on September 4. More than one person has come up to me and said, “You had a relatively short honeymoon.” That would be accurate.

Before I go further, I thank you for your leadership—Mayor Morial of New Orleans, Louisiana; Mayor Menino of Boston, Massachusetts; Mayor Garner of Hempstead, New York; and Executive Director Cochran of the U.S. Conference of Mayors—for having the foresight and the wisdom to call this important meeting and for giving me the opportunity to join with you today.

I thank all of you for the outstanding leadership that you are providing to your cities and to our country. At this pivotal—I think it is fair to say—moment in history, you have been towers of strength in your communities. Particularly, I thank you for the extraordinary support, cooperation, and guidance that you have provided to the FBI during these past 6 weeks.

This morning, I want to let you know how deeply committed the FBI is to working with you to ensure the safety and security of your communities now and in the future. The FBI is pouring its heart and soul into the investigation of the September 11 attacks. Every resource that can be deployed is being deployed. Every person who can be utilized is being utilized. We now have well over 7,000 FBI personnel involved, and that’s about 1 in 4 of our employees. We are examining every scrap of evidence. In fact, we have gathered, sometimes working on hands and knees in the rubble and mud of crash sites, more than 3,700 separate pieces of evidence. This is easily the largest and most comprehensive investigation in our history.

Beyond the investigation itself, our overriding priority right now is prevention, making sure that terrorists do not succeed in striking America and America’s cities again. Now, it may well be overly optimistic to think that every single attack can be prevented. But, we can certainly give it everything we have got, and that is exactly what we are doing.

We at the FBI are not new to prevention. With your help, over the last few years, we have had

successes. An example, perhaps, would be 2 years ago when we foiled a plot to blow up a gas tank in Sacramento, perhaps saving as many as 12,000 lives. But, historically, we have been better at tracking down terrorists after the fact than at stopping them in their tracks before they strike. We have, in the past, not always aligned our resources, our strategies, and our skills specifically toward prevention, to the degree that they are now so aligned.

A few weeks ago, we established at FBI headquarters a terrorist prevention task force made up of representatives of a dozen different agencies. Its goal is to identify and stop future terrorists acts with proactive investigations and to attempt to predict and to prevent future scenarios. The work of this group, for example, led us to heighten sensitivities on crop dusters in the latter part of September. We have had in the past and do today have 35 joint terrorist task forces located in your cities and in other cities across the country. Those task forces are working hard to gather intelligence and pursue any hint of a lead that might help us identify terrorists or their associates. We also have beefed up our resources overseas, where many of the leads have taken us and where we’re getting some outstanding cooperation from Great Britain, Germany, France, Spain, and a number of other countries.

We also are working with you and other colleagues at the federal, state, and local level to shore up

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security at critical public events and to protect critical infrastructures, like water and transportation systems. We are assessing threats in real time and providing warnings to your cities and to the nation. I must tell you that the threat level remains very high. More attempts and possible attacks are a distinct possibility. This possibility requires all of us to continue walking the fine line of staying alert on the one hand, without causing undue harm on the other hand.

Clearly, we are deeply concerned about the growing wave of anthrax attacks and related incidents. At this point, it is not clear if the few confirmed anthrax exposures were motivated by organized terrorism, but these attacks were clearly meant to terrorize a country already on the edge. We are responding swiftly to each and every incident. By way of background, we usually are involved in 250 assessments and responses relating to weapons of mass destruction a year. We have had more than 3,300 in just the past 3 weeks alone, including 2,500 involving suspected anthrax incidents. Even though most turn out to be false alarms or hoaxes, we are taking each report seriously, as I know each of you in your cities are doing also. And, those who are pulling pranks and hoaxes won't find our severe response to those all that funny.

Our work in these investigations, of course, has been supported at every turn by you and your colleagues across the nation, as well as by a host of federal, state, and even international partners. From the first moment that I joined the FBI several weeks ago, one of my highest priorities has been to improve our working relationship with you, with elected leaders, and with law enforcement partners around the world. And, the events of September 11 have only strengthened my resolve in that regard. From my experience, I am now even more convinced that no one institution is strong enough to tackle the challenge of terrorism alone. No one agency or entity at any level, whether it be federal, state or local, has the length or the breadth of talent and expertise. We must

work together. Law enforcement, quite simply, is only as good as its relationships.

These past 6 weeks have given me a good opportunity to see how well our FBI supports you and your cities, and I have seen encouraging signs. I know that many of our special agents in charge, or SACs, are reaching out and keeping you involved and informed. But at the same time, I heard that there are some areas where lines of communication are not as open as they should be, where we are keeping you at arm's length, and where we are not affording you the level of support you deserve.

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As soon as I heard of these issues, I reached out to key law enforcement leaders and asked them to educate me on their issues and their concerns. I asked them to give it to me straight, and they did.

Building on these initial conversations, I held a series of meetings last week with representatives of the major city chiefs, the Interna-

tional Association of Chiefs of Police, and the National Sheriff's Association, and along with the attorney general, had met with a number of other similar law enforcement associations. The meetings were helpful, open, candid, and, I think, productive.

What we heard will likely be familiar to many of you. We heard that the FBI is not always calling on your local police professionals to track down leads; that we are sometimes not following up quickly enough on leads that come to us that involve your cities; that you need information digitally, if at all possible; that the FBI is not giving you specific enough information on threats; and that we are even withholding information.

Let me clarify the last point, the point about specific information on threats and withholding information. The FBI is not withholding significant information due to security concerns. The fact is much of the information we have can be released to law enforcement. But, the fact is also that often, on most occasions, our information is simply not as specific or developed as we would all like it to be.