

President Says U.S. Attorneys on Front Line in War

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Remarks by the President to U.S. Attorneys Conference
Presidential Hall
Dwight David Eisenhower Office Building

Introduced by Attorney General John Ashcroft, President George W. Bush addresses a group of new U. S. Attorneys at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building Nov. 29. I want to congratulate you. I must tell you that we set a high standard, and you met it. And for that, I hope you're proud, said the President in his remarks. And I am grateful that you are willing to serve the country, particularly at this time. White House photo by Paul Morse.

3:06 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Well, John, thank you very much for those kind words. And I appreciate your strong leadership. It is a principled leadership, it is a steady leadership, and it is a leadership that is good for America.

I guess we call you General. (Laughter.) That means you all are in the Army. (Laughter.) And I am glad you are.

I also want to thank Larry Thompson for his good work; thank you for being here, Larry. And where's Al Gonzales, who is my -- (applause.) Al led the effort to scour the country for the best to serve as U.S. attorneys, and I appreciate his hard work. And I suspect you new U.S. attorneys appreciate his hard work, as well. (Laughter.)

But Al has been my lawyer for a long time, and was a lawyer for the state of Texas, and was a judge for the state of Texas. And he is a pretty special guy, and I'm glad he's here in Washington with me. And I'm glad you all are here, as well. Thank you for coming. I want to welcome you here.

I want to welcome the new U.S. attorneys. I want to congratulate you. I must tell you that we set a high standard, and you met it. And for that, I hope you're proud. And I am grateful that you are willing to serve the country, particularly at this time.

I know you know this, but I want to remind you that you have got a significant commitment to the security and safety of the American people. We all do. That's our job. And it's a job we will keep.

The security and safety of our people was threatened before September the 11th. In many neighborhoods, there's too much gun violence in America. Despite all the progress against crime, teenagers, almost as many teenagers die from gunshot wounds as from all natural causes combined. And that's not right, and we are going to do something about it.

We must help people reclaim their neighborhoods and their streets. We must help those who want to live in a comfortable environment feel safe. That's one of our primary jobs. And so I proposed a program called Project Safe Neighborhoods. And you have a clear charge to fight gun violence in America.

U.S. Attorneys will work with state and local authorities in an all-out campaign, in a focused and vigorous effort to cut gun crime. By September of this year -- of next year, 2002, we hope to have 200 new attorneys hired to prosecute crimes committed with a gun, 200 new attorneys to help you stay focused on an important mission, which is the safety of our citizens.

Investigators will have the best training and the latest technology available. We want to enhance the technology, so we can find those, track those, communicate better with each other, to bring people to justice

who commit a crime with a gun.

We'll improve data-sharing and criminal record-keeping, to ensure that people who shouldn't have guns don't get them. We've got to prevent those people who want to use guns to hurt our fellow citizens from getting them in the first place.

And finally, we want to make sure that the federal government works more closely with communities and community-based programs, and faith-based groups, to steer our children away from guns before they take a life or lose their own. In other words, on the one hand, I want you to be tough. And on the other hand, I want you to rally the compassionate loving souls in neighborhoods who can teach children lessons from right, from wrong.

This is an important calling. The methods work in those cities where they've -- we tried a program that I just outlined, they work. Statistics show it, and now we've got to make sure it exists all across the country.

This is an important charge for you. It's one of your top priorities, because it's one of mine. We have got to send this message -- and I mean a clear message, an unambiguous message -- that if you illegally carry or use a gun, there is one consequence in America: arrest and jail. The best way to make sure our neighborhoods are safe is to enforce the laws on the books. And to the best of our ability, we will give you more tools to do that.

The safety and security of America also faces a new threat, and that is the threat of terror. It is the calling of our time, to rid the world of terror. And it is the calling of our time to protect the American people.

You know, it's interesting -- I can't imagine what a speech like this would have been like prior to September the 11th, but I doubt I would have ever said, you are now on the front line of war. And that's where you are. And make no mistake about it, we've got a war here just like we've got a war abroad. And we have a huge responsibility, and that's to defend America while protecting our great liberties. And I'm confident you can do the job; otherwise you wouldn't be sitting here.

Our enemies are resourceful, and they are incredibly ruthless. They hide and they plot, and they target freedom. They can't stand what America stands for. It must bother them greatly to know we're such a free and wonderful place -- a place where all religions can flourish; a place where women are free; a place where children can be educated. It must grate on them greatly. But that's what we're going to keep doing, because that's what America is about.

And we owe it to the American people. We owe it to our citizens, to the families, to be relentless and methodical in tracking down terrorists and bringing each and every one of them to justice. That's our calling. It's the calling of the 21st century. And it's a calling that we will not tire for; it's a calling that we will keep in our minds. And you must keep it in your minds, because I can assure I'm going to keep it in mine.

The government and the people are determined. And I have been able to travel our country some, and I know you can -- if you were to report back to me, you would tell me you've seen the same determination, and the same patience, and the same unity, to achieve this objective. I like to remind people that the evil ones have roused a mighty nation, and they will pay a serious price.

Abroad, our military and our alliance is making good progress -- good, steady, significant progress. We're disrupting their cash flows. We're finding their bankers. And we're shutting them down.

And it's not just America. There are a lot of other countries who have participated with us, and that's heartening. We've got great intelligence-sharing now, around the world. I've been able to say to a lot of leaders, face to face, you tell us when their coming. And if we find out something about you, we'll let you know, too. And that's important. It's important to know as much information as possible about the enemy. It's important to try to figure out where they hide, and their intentions. It helps to have a vast coalition willing to share that kind of information.

And we're bringing a lot of terrorists to justice around the world, as well. I think we've arrested over 300 -- we, the coalition, has arrested over 350 al Qaeda members and terrorists. I was able to thank President Aznar of Spain this week, for arresting eight -- eight terrorists, eight people who hate freedom are now in jail, where they should be. And hopefully they'll give us some information that we will share with other coalition members, to keep us all safe.

And as we speak, we're enforcing the doctrine that makes it plain that not only do we seek the terrorists, but we also hold governments that harbor them and feed them and house them and hide them accountable for their behavior, as well.

Afghanistan is the first overseas front in this war against terror. And I'm pleased to report the military is performing really well. In a short period of time, most of the country now is in the hands of our allies and friends. We've rescued the humanitarian aid workers. We've destroyed the Taliban military. They're in total confusion. The government that used to hate women, and not educate its children, and disrupt humanitarian supplies, and destroy religious symbols of other religions is now in rout.

And we've got al Qaeda on the run, too. Now, they think they can hide, but they can't hide for long. And they think they can run, but they can't run forever, because we will patiently, diligently, pursue them until they are brought to justice. (Applause.)

And on the home front, terrorist violence must be prevented, and must be defeated. And it will be, with vigilance, aggressive investigation, and certain punishment. Already, we've committed significant new resources to homeland security. We've improved our ability to detect and stop terrorist activity. But we've still got a lot of work to do.

I'm pleased to report the culture of the FBI is changing, the people you'll be working with in the field is changing. Now, one in four employees of the FBI are directly involved with the efforts to track down every lead and to disrupt the evil ones. And our new investigations are moving forward. And as we do so, our laws are being enforced fairly and in full.

We'll hear from material witnesses. We'll give them a chance to participate in the war against terror by telling us what they know. We will apply the immigration laws. We're interviewing people, on a voluntary basis. We're saying, welcome to America. You have come to our country; why don't you help make us safe? Why don't you share information with us? Why don't you help us protect innocent people, women and children and men? Why don't you help us value life? As you enjoy the freedoms of our country, help us protect those freedoms.

But there is no doubt about our intentions, and there shouldn't be. Those who plot terror, and those who help them, will be held accountable in America. That's what we're going to do. Protecting the innocent against violence is a solemn duty of this country. It is our most important responsibility now. And all of us in this room accept that responsibility. And we will tell the American people plainly, we will fulfill that responsibility.

To meet that obligation, a wartime reorganization is underway at the Justice Department. More investigators will go to front lines. The federal government will work more closely with state and local authorities -- and so will you. Agents will receive better training and new technology, to help track and capture terrorists or those who support them. And these changes are essential, and I want to thank the Attorney General and Director Mueller for beginning this transformation.

I have also reserved the option of trial by military commission for foreign terrorists who wage war against our country. Non-citizens, non-U.S. citizens who plan and/or commit mass murder are more than criminal suspects. They are unlawful combatants who seek to destroy our country and our way of life. And if I determine that it is in the national security interest of our great land to try by military commission those who make war on America, then we will do so. (Applause.)

We will act with fairness, and we will deliver justice, which is far more than the terrorists ever grant to their innocent victims.

Ours is a great land, and we'll always value freedom. We're an open society. But we're at war. The enemy has declared war on us. And we must not let foreign enemies use the forums of liberty to destroy liberty, itself. Foreign terrorists and agents must never again be allowed to use our freedoms against us.

Many of you will play a crucial part in our victory against terrorism, and make no mistake, we're going to win the war. Decisions important to millions of Americans will be made in your offices. Your work in the cause of justice will help ensure the security of this nation. And as you join this fight, you will honor the Constitution. You will not only protect our people, but you will uphold our values.

Every federal prosecutor has the unique privilege of standing up in a court and telling the judge that you are there on behalf of the United States. In a time of war, these words are even more deeply felt, are even more

significant.

Yours is a great trust, and one of the great professions. Today, you carry not only the confidence and respect of the American people, but you carry our deep gratitude, as well. God bless.

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