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Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation

The Cross Hall

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President's Remarks

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THE PRESIDENT: Good evening. During the next few minutes, I want to update you on the progress we are making in our war against terror, and to propose sweeping changes that will strengthen our homeland against the ongoing threat of terrorist attacks.

Nearly nine months have passed since the day that forever changed our country. Debris from what was once the World Trade Center has been cleared away in a hundred thousand truckloads. The west side of the Pentagon looks almost as it did on September the 10th. And as children finish school and families prepare for summer vacations, for many, life seems almost normal.

Yet we are a different nation today -- sadder and stronger, less innocent and more courageous, more appreciative of life, and for many who serve our country, more willing to risk life in a great cause. For those who have lost family and friends, the pain will never go away -- and neither will the responsibilities that day thrust upon all of us. America is leading the civilized world in a titanic struggle against terror. Freedom and fear are at war -- and freedom is winning.

Tonight over 60,000 American troops are deployed around the world in the war against terror -- more than 7,000 in Afghanistan; others in the Philippines, Yemen, and the Republic of Georgia, to train local forces. Next week Afghanistan will begin selecting a representative government, even as American troops, along with our allies, still continuously raid remote al Qaeda hiding places.

Among those we have captured is a man named Abu Zabedah, al Qaeda's chief of operations. From him, and from hundreds of others, we are learning more about how the terrorists plan and operate; information crucial in anticipating and preventing future attacks.

Our coalition is strong. More than 90 nations have arrested or detained over 2,400 terrorists and their supporters. More than 180 countries have offered or are providing assistance in the war on terrorism. And our military is strong and prepared to oppose any emerging threat to the American people.

Every day in this war will not bring the drama of liberating a country. Yet every day brings new information, a tip or arrest, another step, or two, or three in a relentless march to bring security to our nation and justice to our enemies.

Every day I review a document called the threat assessment. It summarizes what our intelligence services and key law enforcement agencies have picked up about terrorist activity. Sometimes the information is very general -- vague talk, bragging about future attacks. Sometimes the information is more specific, as in a recent case when an al Qaeda detainee said attacks were planned against financial institutions.

When credible intelligence warrants, appropriate law enforcement and local officials are alerted. These warnings are, unfortunately, a new reality in American life -- and we have recently seen an increase in the volume of general threats. Americans should continue to do what you're doing -- go about your lives, but pay attention to your surroundings. Add your eyes and ears to the protection of our homeland.

In protecting our country, we depend on the skill of our people -- the troops we send to battle, intelligence operatives

who risk their lives for bits of information, law enforcement officers who sift for clues and search for suspects. We are now learning that before September the 11th, the suspicions and insights of some of our front-line agents did not get enough attention.

My administration supports the important work of the intelligence committees in Congress to review the activities of law enforcement and intelligence agencies. We need to know when warnings were missed or signs unheeded -- not to point the finger of blame, but to make sure we correct any problems, and prevent them from happening again.

Based on everything I've seen, I do not believe anyone could have prevented the horror of September the 11th. Yet we now know that thousands of trained killers are plotting to attack us, and this terrible knowledge requires us to act differently.

If you're a front-line worker for the FBI, the CIA, some other law enforcement or intelligence agency, and you see something that raises suspicions, I want you to report it immediately. I expect your supervisors to treat it with the seriousness it deserves. Information must be fully shared, so we can follow every lead to find the one that may prevent tragedy.

I applaud the leaders and employees at the FBI and CIA for beginning essential reforms. They must continue to think and act differently to defeat the enemy.

The first and best way to secure America's homeland is to attack the enemy where he hides and plans, and we're doing just that. We're also taking significant steps to strengthen our homeland protections -- securing cockpits, tightening our borders, stockpiling vaccines, increasing security at water treatment and nuclear power plants.

After September the 11th, we needed to move quickly, and so I appointed Tom Ridge as my Homeland Security Advisor. As Governor Ridge has worked with all levels of government to prepare a national strategy, and as we have learned more about the plans and capabilities of the terrorist network, we have concluded that our government must be reorganized to deal more effectively with the new threats of the 21st century. So tonight, I ask the Congress to join me in creating a single, permanent department with an overriding and urgent mission: securing the homeland of America, and protecting the American people.

Right now, as many as a hundred different government agencies have some responsibilities for homeland security, and no one has final accountability. For example, the Coast Guard has several missions, from search and rescue to maritime treaty enforcement. It reports to the Transportation Department, whose primary responsibilities are roads, rails, bridges and the airways. The Customs Service, among other duties, collects tariffs and prevents smuggling -- and it is part of the Treasury Department, whose primary responsibility is fiscal policy, not security.

Tonight, I propose a permanent Cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security to unite essential agencies that must work more closely together: Among them, the Coast Guard, the Border Patrol, the Customs Service, Immigration officials, the Transportation Security Administration, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Employees of this new agency will come to work every morning knowing their most important job is to protect their fellow citizens. The Department of Homeland Security will be charged with --

The Department of Homeland Security will be charged with four primary tasks. This new agency will control our borders and prevent terrorists and explosives from entering our country. It will work with state and local authorities to respond quickly and effectively to emergencies. It will bring together our best scientists to develop technologies that detect biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons, and to discover the drugs and treatments to best protect our citizens. And this new department will review intelligence and law enforcement information from all agencies of government, and produce a single daily picture of threats against our homeland. Analysts will be responsible for imagining the worst, and planning to counter it.

The reason to create this department is not to create the size of government, but to increase its focus and effectiveness. The staff of this new department will be largely drawn from the agencies we are combining. By ending duplication and overlap, we will spend less on overhead, and more on protecting America. This reorganization will give the good people of our government their best opportunity to succeed by organizing our resources in a way that is thorough and unified.

What I am proposing tonight is the most extensive reorganization of the federal government since the 1940s. During his presidency, Harry Truman recognized that our nation's fragmented defenses had to be reorganized to win the Cold War. He proposed uniting our military forces under a single Department of Defense, and creating the National Security Council to bring together defense, intelligence, and diplomacy. Truman's reforms are still helping us to fight terror abroad, and now we need similar dramatic reforms to secure our people at home.

Only the United States Congress can create a new department of government. So tonight, I ask for your help in encouraging your representatives to support my plan. We face an urgent need, and we must move quickly, this year, before the end of the congressional session. All in our government have learned a great deal since September the 11th, and we must act on every lesson. We are stronger and better prepared tonight than we were on that terrible morning -- and with your help, and the support of Congress, we will be stronger still.

History has called our nation into action. History has placed a great challenge before us: Will America -- with our unique position and power -- blink in the face of terror, or will we lead to a freer, more civilized world? There's only one answer: This great country will lead the world to safety, security, peace and freedom.

Thank you for listening. Good night, and may God bless America.

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