

President Bush Meets with Nation's Governors

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Remarks by the President to the National Governors Association

The East Room

3:12 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all. Welcome back. I've got a few remarks I'd like to make. I understand a couple of governors are going to make some remarks, and then I'll be glad to answer some questions if you have any.

First, I again want to say what I said last night. This has been a trying time for all of us. We've been tested here in the Nation's Capital, but you all have been tested, as well, and I want to congratulate you on your great leadership.

You know, the people of our country looked to all of us to determine how we'd react after September 11th. And I was impressed by the calm demeanor of the governors, and the steady resolve to lead the people. The country cried for leadership, and you all provided it. And thanks a lot for doing that.

I also love to welcome governors because governors are problem-solvers. In this town, there's a lot of talkers, and kind of problem-shufflers. But governors are problem-solvers. And it's going to be good to be able to talk to each other about how to solve problems that we face -- budget problems, the issue of homeland security, education, as well as welfare reform.

And I want to talk about three of them briefly today, and that's homeland security -- first, I appreciate the governor, the leadership. I want to thank Engler, and Governor Patton for you hosting the NGA here and coming by the White House.

I also want to thank my friend, Tom Ridge. You know, he was doing pretty good as the governor of Pennsylvania, just sitting around -- (laughter) -- looking for something to do. And I called him, and I said, we've got a problem. We've got to secure our homeland. I said, this is an enemy that wants to hit us again, and I said, we'd better be ready. And I said, would you come and be a member of my Cabinet, be sitting at my right hand there, and design a national strategy for homeland security? And, fortunately, for the country, he said yes. And he's doing a fine job.

And we've begun, as you all know, an extensive program to have a better first responders initiative. And we've got \$1.6 billion of new money in the budget for that -- no -- yes, \$3.5 -- right. But I mean -- for homeland, for first responders is how much?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: We're going -- different parts of it are going up, but this \$3.5 billion.

THE PRESIDENT: \$3.5 billion. And then we've got \$1.6 billion for bioterrorism. And we're working on a border security initiative, and we're reforming the INS.

As I like to tell people, we now need to know who's coming in and when they're leaving, for the good of the security of the country. I remember going up to Maine and talking about strengthening the Coast Guard, which matters to those of you who live on the oceans and on the Gulf of Mexico. The Coast Guard is such a valuable part of our homeland security piece, and our budget includes increases for the Coast Guard, a modernization of our fleet.

And so I'm real proud of the efforts we're making. And obviously, you all play a crucial role in not only helping develop a homeland defense strategy, but the implementation of the strategy. And I think you'll find -- I guess Tom has talked to you already -- that we understand the need to coordinate. And both of us were governors, and we simply do not want the federal government to be -- seem distant and removed on this important issue.

And then education. We passed a great education bill. As I used to -- tease people, I said it came as a complete shock to people in Crawford, Texas, that I would say that Ted Kennedy did a great job on a bill, but he did. This is a good piece of legislation, because it sets clear priorities, it encourages accountability so that no child is quit on, that people -- we focus on each individual child.

It also provides states more flexibility than ever before, and it's got some money in it. It's got more Title -- a billion dollars in more Title I money. It's got a substantial increase for the reading initiative. It is a good piece of legislation. And now, obviously it depends upon its implementation. And so we're working closely with Rod Paige and the Department of Education to make sure that the intent of the law is now implemented fully. And we look forward to working with you on that.

Obviously -- I used to say that education is to a governor what national defense is to the President. It is by far the most important priority for a governor. And I know that, and I understand that. And this bill is -- it reflects that. And we'll make sure the implementation of it reflects that, as well.

And then, welfare reform. Welfare authorization is coming up. I start with the idea that the '96 bill was a really good piece of legislation. And it changed welfare for the better, primarily because it relied upon governors. It had a substantial local control element in it. And so as we reauthorize welfare, we want to make sure that there is substantial authority at the local level.

We'll talk about funding. The budget I laid out for welfare reform holds the grants constant. Actually, it increases the -- as a result of the supplemental and the contingency fund, it increases funding by -- let's see, \$3.2 billion over the next five years, on top of the grants that are already in place.

And so the fundamental question is, will there be enough local authority, enough flexibility at the local level to meet what I hope Congress passes, which are new work requirements. See, I think work ought to be the core of welfare reform. I think in order to make sure that welfare reform works, that there's flexibility at the states, that there's recognition people need training or drug rehabilitation, but work ought to be the centerpiece of a good welfare law.

And the bill I'm going to outline tomorrow, with Tommy at my side -- where are you, Tommy? There he is -- is going to take the positive pieces of the '96 welfare law, changing welfare as we knew it, and we're going to make it better. There's more to do, and we look forward to working with you on that, as well.

And so those are the things that are on my mind. I know you've got things on your mind, and I look forward to hearing them, and we can have a good discussion today.

I want to welcome you back. I recognize I'm not exactly Bernadette Peters -- (laughter) -- but she did a fabulous job last night to fill this hall. It was such a joyous night, and it's particularly joyous for me and Laura to be with our old friends, the governors.

God bless. (Applause.)

END 3:25 P.M. EST

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