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Remarks by the President in Bob Riley for Governor and Alabama Republican Party Victory 2002 Luncheon

Birmingham Jefferson Convention Complex
Birmingham, Alabama

11:46 A.M. CDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all very much. Please, be seated. It's a long speech. (Laughter.)

Thanks so much for coming. I don't know whether you know this or not, but in 1972, I helped organize Red Blount's campaign for the United States Senate right here in the state of Alabama. Because of me and Jimmy Allison, he managed to get 32 percent of the vote. (Laughter.) But I learned then and there how great the people are of the state of Alabama. I've got fond affection of those times. I count many of you as my friends, and I want to thank you for coming today to help the next governor of the state of Alabama, Bob Riley. (Applause.)

There is no doubt in my mind he is going to win. (Applause.) And I want to thank you all for helping. He's going to win because he's got a fantastic grass-roots organization. Many of the grass-roots activists are here today.

I want to thank you for what you're fixing to do, which is to start dialing phones and putting up signs and knocking on doors and going to coffee shops and going to your churches and synagogues to remind people that with Bob Riley you've got a good, honest politician who's going to bring integrity to Montgomery, Alabama, and he's going to reform the state on behalf of all the people of this great state. (Applause.)

He's also going to win because he married well. (Laughter.) And I appreciate Patsy Riley and the Riley family for standing by Bob as he makes this very important run for the governorship. Patsy, thank you for being here. God bless you all. (Applause.)

And I know something about marrying well. I did. (Applause.) I'm really proud of Laura. She was a public school librarian when she married me. She didn't care for politics or politicians. Here she is, First Lady of the United States, and doing a fantastic job. (Applause.)

I want to also urge you all as you're turning out to vote for Bob to make sure you turn out to vote for Jeff Sessions, who is a fantastic United States senator. (Applause.) I appreciate working with Jeff, and I appreciate working with Richard Shelby, as well -- two great United States senators who have got -- (applause.) They're always talking about Alabama when I'm with them, reminding me of Alabama. And that's what you want your senators to do. But they've also got the capacity to think about the country, as well. I'm proud of your senators, and I hope you are, as well. And Jeff needs your help. You need to take nothing for granted in this election year. It's important for the good of your country and for the good of your state that Jeff Sessions be sent back to the United States Senate for another term. (Applause.)

I want to thank members of the United States House of Representatives from the state of Alabama are here with us today. Starting with a man we're going to miss, out of Mobile, Alabama: Sonny Callahan. Where are you? There he is, Sonny. (Applause.) Sonny's a good one. (Applause.) Sonny has served the state and the country with great distinction. He announced his retirement earlier on this year. It's just too darn bad he decided to go fishing all the time, but it's a well-deserved rest and he's a fine man.

I also appreciate so very much Terry Everett, from Montgomery, for coming today. Terry, I appreciate you being here. As well as Robert Aderholt and Spencer Bachus. Thank you all for coming. (Applause.)

I know a lot of members of the State House are here, folks who Bob Riley is going to be working with when he becomes the governor. I know the Lieutenant Governor, Steve Windom, is here; as is the Attorney General, Bill Pryor. And I want to thank you both for coming, as well. (Applause.)

I want to thank Jim Bennett, the Alabama Secretary of State and all the members of the State House, the senators and House of Representatives who are here to support your next governor. It's good that you're here, as people are

beginning to realize he's going to win, you're beginning to realize he's going to win. So it's kind of good to get in good with the governor early. (Laughter.) At least, that's how we did it in Texas, and I suspect Alabama is that way, too. The governor is going to remember who was with him early and who kind of got on the late train.

But the good news, he's going to be the governor of everybody when he wins. He's not going to play this business of pitting one group of people against the other. (Applause.) We've got some fine candidates running to replace Sonny Callahan and Bob Riley. We've got Jo Bonner from the Alabama First Congressional District. Jo, are you here? (Applause.) There he is. I appreciate you, Jo. (Applause.) And Mike Rogers from Alabama Three is here as well. (Applause.) Thank you, Mike. (Applause.)

But I'm here to help this good man get elected to the governorship. It's a job I understand. I was a -- great honor to be the governor of my state. It's a fantastic opportunity to make a difference in the lives of a lot of people, particularly if you've got a governor like Bob Riley, who's got a positive vision for everybody; a vision that says, the most important job for the governor is to make sure that every child gets a good education. (Applause.)

I know his passion about education, because he helped me get the education bill through the House of Representatives. And I'd like to outline the principles of that bill, so that the people of Alabama understand what he will do when given the chance to be the governor. The first principle, it says that we believe -- Riley and I believe, and I hope you believe with us -- that every child can learn. We set the highest of high standards. We understand that in order to get the best for every child, you must have high expectations. See, we understand if you have low expectations, you get low results.

There are some people in our society who don't believe every child can learn, and therefore they're willing to set low standards. That's opposite what we think. We believe every child can learn, and we expect every child to learn. And therefore, the bill I signed said in return for federal money, in return for a good size budget increase, I might add, for Title I students, we expect you to teach them how to read and write and add and subtract.

You see, we're tired of the days when children were just shuffled through the system, the days when expectations were so low that it seemed okay to pass those through who weren't supposed to be able to learn. For the good of the country, for the good of the state of Alabama, those days of passing children through without teaching them to read and write and add and subtract must end, and will end. (Applause.)

We believe in accountability, because we want to know. We understand you can't change a system unless you measure it. We understand you can't correct a problem unless you measure it. We understand that if you want every child to learn to read and write and add and subtract, we must determine if every child can read and write and add and subtract early in their school career.

Now, I've heard every excuse in the world -- you know, you shouldn't test, it's racist to test. My fellow Americans, it's racist not to test. It's racist not to hold people accountable for the children in the state of Alabama. (Applause.)

And, finally, Bob and I share a deep conviction that if you want to have excellence for every child, you must trust the local folks to chart the path to excellence. One size doesn't fit all across America; one size doesn't fit all across the state of Alabama. We must empower people at the local level to meet the high standards by holding them in account, but trusting, first and foremost, the fact that the parents and the people closest to the children are those who are more likely to design a program that will meet our national goals, which is every child learning, and not one single child left behind.

I'm confident in telling you that the vision of Bob Riley as governor of the state of Alabama, the education vision is the right vision for the future of this important state. (Applause.) But it is part of attracting jobs to your state. When the word gets out that the Riley reforms are taking hold, and children aren't being left behind, there's going to be a lot of people coming -- I want to work here in Alabama, I want to bring my business in Alabama, assuming of course that you make sure that the junk lawsuits that plague this state and other states don't continue to reign supreme. (Applause.)

And it's good you're about to put a tort reformer in the governor's mansion in the state of Alabama. It is necessary -- look, we want our people to have access to the courts, no question about it. If you've got a legitimate claim, you ought to have your day in court. But it's important to remember that the frivolous and junk lawsuits that get filed all the time are clogging the ability of people with honest claims to get to the courthouses in Alabama and across the country. Tort reform is important for the state. (Applause.)

And I appreciated Bob's strong support on the tax relief package which we passed -- not only his strong support, but the strong support of the other members of Congress and of course the two United States senators. We cut taxes right at the right time in our country. This economy began to slow down in March of 2000. And we understand that one way

to encourage economic growth is to let the people keep their own money. You see, when you have your own money, you decide, do you want to spend it on a good or a service? And when you make that decision, somebody has got to produce the good or service. And when they produce the good and service, it means somebody is more likely to find work. Tax relief was right for America when we did it, and I'm proud to have Bob Riley's support. (Applause.)

And it was more than just reducing rates -- which, by the way, will stimulate small business growth here in Alabama. I had the honor of meeting some of your fine small business owners at the University of Alabama-Birmingham today. And, by the way, that is an impressive campus, that has got an impressive mission here for Alabama's future.

And we talked about how to encourage ownership. And Bob understands a healthy and whole society in which people from all walks of life had the opportunity to own their own business. And I explained to them that the tax relief package we passed was good for small business; it was good for the capital formation necessary for small businesses to thrive because most small businesses are sole proprietorships, most small businesses are limited partnerships which pay tax on the individual rate schedule. And when you reduce the individual rates, you're reducing the taxes on the start-ups and the small businesses.

And, after all, it's important to understand the role of small business has like Bob does, because 70 percent of the new jobs in America are created by small businesses. And so it's going to be good for Alabama to have a governor who understands that the role of government is not to create wealth, but the role of government is to create an environment in which entrepreneurs from all walks of life are able to realize their dream -- and that's to own their own business. (Applause.)

We've got work to do in Washington on this, a matter of economic security. The heady days of the '90s, the boom days of the '90s, it was like we were on a binge where there was no -- the horizon was forever going up. And we binged, and now we're suffering a hangover. But the foundations for economic vitality and growth are very strong: low inflation, good monetary policy.

One of the risks to economic vitality is whether or not Congress will over-spend. They give the President a veto for a reason -- to make sure that Congress doesn't over-spend. And I expect there to be fiscal discipline in Washington this summer, and as importantly, this fall, as we run up into an election year. I expect Congress to set as its priorities the priorities that I think are important, and that is the defense of the United States of America, and our military budget. (Applause.)

We need to be a nation which is willing to be confident and strong and open up markets for Alabama farmers and Alabama ranchers and Alabama entrepreneurs. Congress needs to give me trade promotion authority. They ought to stop talking and start acting in Washington, D.C. (Applause.)

For the good of our economic growth, we need to have a terrorism insurance bill which will encourage the creation of construction work all around America, and we need a terrorism insurance bill that focuses more on working America and less on trial lawyer America. (Applause.)

The foundations for growth are there. We had an over 6 percent growth in the first quarter of this year. Durable good purchasing is up. Last month retail sales were up by a percent. The American people need to know that we've got the potential to grow, and grow strong. But so long as anybody is looking for work and can't find work, I think we've got a problem. And I'm going to continue to work the problem.

And part of the problem is the fact that people don't have confidence in business leaders. A few -- and I emphasize, a few -- of corporate America's leadership have polluted the well for many. And the best thing the United States government can do is hold them to account, because we expect high standards from business America. We expect corporate CEOs to understand the responsibility of their jobs: to be open and honest with the American people; to be open and honest with the shareholders; and to treat their employees with respect.

So we're going to pass some laws, and I'm confident that the laws that are passed out of the Senate and the House will be laws that will set the right tone and right standards without jeopardizing innovation and enterprise here in America. But I can assure you, when I talk about personal responsibility in America, I expect there to be corporate responsibility, as well. And we will hold those to account who do not uphold those high standards in America. (Applause.)

I'm very optimistic about our economy. I'm optimistic about our country, too. And we've got some big jobs to do; no question about it. My biggest job is to protect the American people from another attack, and I know that. I go to the Oval Office every morning -- and by the way, walking into that office is an unbelievable experience. It's unbelievable now that I've been up there for about a year and a half; it will be unbelievable for however long I'm there, I can promise you. It's unbelievable for me and my dog Spot, I might add. They don't let Barney in. It's a new carpet and Barney's a new dog.

(Laughter.)

But every morning I sit there at the HMS Resolute desk -- Teddy Roosevelt used it, Franklin Roosevelt used it, Kennedy used it, Ronald Reagan used it. I open up the threats to the United States of America. There's an assessment, it's a summary of what we think we know. You need to know that the enemy we fight is still interested in harming our country. I'm sure a lot of young people wonder why -- we're a kind nation. And you need to know they hate us because we love freedom. We love to worship freely. We love to speak our mind. We love a free press. We love all the aspects of our freedom. But what they didn't understand is that we're willing to defend our freedoms at any cost, any place, anywhere. (Applause.) Thank you, all.

We're making progress here at home. You know, I readily concede I didn't run on the ticket: vote for me -- I'll try to make government bigger. I did say, I'll try to make it work better. And that's why I proposed the Department of Homeland Security. There are over 100 agencies dealing with homeland security. They're scattered all over Washington. It makes it awfully hard to set priority and to hold people accountable.

For the sake of the defense of our nation, I think it's important that the major agencies and many of the minor agencies involved with homeland security be organized under one umbrella group, one Cabinet officer. It's going to save us money because we'll be able to get rid of the duplication of some services. But, more importantly, it will help us install a new culture, which says that no matter what other assignments you might have, your most important function, Mr. Agency Head and all the people who work for you, is to protect the American people; is to understand we're in a new era, that we fight a new war; that America is still threatened, and so long as America is threatened, we need to work overtime to make sure we protect the American people. And that's what's going on. (Applause.)

We're getting pretty good cooperation. I appreciate the bipartisan spirit in Washington. There is such a thing, some times, and that's important. It's important to understand my proposal wasn't a Republican idea, it wasn't a Democrat idea -- it's an American idea, to leave behind a legacy, so that future Presidents and future Congresses are going to be able to deal with the true threats we face as we head into the 21st century.

Part of the problem is, and there is a hurdle I recognize, and that is that we're asking some members of Congress to give up turf. And that's okay, I understand that, but I'm going to keep reminding people, congressional turf is not nearly as important as America's security. And, therefore, I expect Congress to act. (Applause.)

We need to know who is coming into our country, why they're coming into our country, and whether or not they're leaving our country when they say they're going to be leaving our country. (Applause.) We need to have an effective strategy at the national, state and local level to deal with the brave police and fire and EMS teams all across our country, so we've got a planned response if necessary. We need to work on bioterrorism, and we need to make sure we've got a coordinating facility within the Homeland Security Department that will take all the bits of intelligence that we gather and coordinate it, and look at it, and assess it, and if there is any vulnerabilities in our country, react to it.

And we're making good progress. You just need to know there are a lot of good folks, good, hard working folks who are working overtime in this phase on the war against terror. And it's part of making sure that the President can say, we're doing all we can do to protect the American people. We're chasing down any lead. Any time we get a hint, any time we get a suggestion that somebody might be planning to do something on American soil against Americans, or for that matter, on Americans or on our allies elsewhere, we're moving, and we're reacting, and we're disrupting. And we're treating these guys for what they are, a bunch of cold-blooded killers, nothing but a bunch of international crooks. (Applause.)

And so our strategy is to keep them on the run, get them on the run, smoke them out of their holes, deny them access, make clear the doctrine that says: either you're with us, or you're with the terrorists; make it clear to people that we're continually doing, if you feed them, if you house them, if you're financing them, you're just as guilty as the murderers who struck the United States on September 11th. (Applause.)

I submitted the largest increase in our defense spending since Ronald Reagan was the President for two reasons: I firmly believe that any time the Commander-in-Chief commits a soldier into harm's way, that person deserves the best pay, the best training, the best equipment possible. (Applause.)

And I know that the signal it sends by the big increase shows our friends and allies, as well as the enemy, that the United States of America is in this war for the long pull, that there's not a moment in time in which we're just going to say, well, fine, we've had enough, we quit. You know, there's no calendar on our collective desks that say, well, by such and such a date, I guess we'll just get kind of tired all this, and shut her down. That's not what history has called us to do. History has called this nation to lead the world against the true threats of the 21st century. And that's precisely what my administration will continue to do. (Applause.)

This is a different kind of war. We don't have the formations of airplanes flying over a territory, we don't have rows of tanks or convoys of destroyers moving around the globe. There's no set battlefield. This is a war where we're hunting them down one by one.

The other day I told the nation, we and our friends and allies have hauled in over 2,400 of these terrorist killers. And we're making progress. Sometimes you'll read about it, and sometimes you won't. Sometimes it will make a splashy headline, but a lot of times you'll never hear about the progress we're making. Sometimes you'll see like what happened in the Philippines, where as I've made it clear, that if we find out there's an al Qaeda-type network in a country, we will go to the leadership and say, we want to help you, you get them, or we'll get them, or we'll get them together. We just want them got. (Laughter and applause.)

And the President of the Philippines, Gloria Arroyo, did just that, by knocking off the head of the group that had captured the Burnhams, American citizens. These are terrorists and kidnapers and killers and their leader no longer is around, thanks to the leadership of our coalition. We're making progress. It's just going to take a while. But that's okay, just so long as the enemy knows that we're going to chase them down, just keep them on the run.

But there's some bigger tasks. You've got to understand, this is bigger than just a terrorist network. I mean, bigger than an individual. I know there's sometimes a preoccupation about it, is so-and-so alive, or is such-and-such dead, you know. This is a struggle for freedom that really talks to the need for our country to not only view the current threats, but future threats -- threats such as some of the world's worst regimes developing weapons of mass destruction, and teaming up with an al Qaeda-type terrorist organization.

We cannot, and we will not, allow the United States and our friends and allies to be blackmailed by the world's worst leaders with the world's worst weapons. We owe it to our children and our grandchildren to eliminate this threat before it becomes a reality. (Applause.)

I believe that out of the evil done to America is going to come incredible good, starting with peace. I want you all to assure your children and your grandchildren that our nation is resolved and tough and strong because we love peace. We want them to grow up in a peaceful world. We not only want them to grow up in a peaceful world, we want youngsters all across the globe to be able to grow up in a peaceful world.

I believe that by remaining strong and resolute and united the way we are, that we can achieve peace in places like the Middle East and in South Asia. I also know that out of the evil done to America is going to come some incredible good here at home, because this nation is such a decent and honorable nation. There are thousands of our fellow citizens who love their neighbor just like they'd like to be loved themselves. Thousands of our citizens who know that they, themselves, can't do everything to make our society a better place for all, but they can do something.

People say, what can I do to help in the war on terror? My answer is, love your neighbor. Find a child who cannot read, and teach him to read. Find a child who might be hopeless and lost, and put your arm around him and tell him or her you love them. Unleash the great power of faith in our society. I strongly believe in faith-based institutions because I know that faith can change hearts for the better in America. (Applause.)

I believe that out of the evil done to America is coming -- is becoming -- we are learning a new sense of what it means to be an American. We're learning that it's more than just the bottom line that counts; that a complete and whole life is one that lends your time and talent and efforts to eradicating despair and hopelessness; to make sure the American experience is in every single neighborhood.

I believe we're ushering in a period of personal responsibility, a period where people understand that their most important job is to love -- if you happen to be a mother or dad, is to love your children with all your heart and soul. That's your most important job. That you have a responsibility, if you're living in Birmingham, to help the community be a better place for everybody. If you run in corporate Birmingham, you've got a responsibility to your shareholders.

And it's happening. Perhaps the most vivid example of serving something greater than yourself happened on Flight 93. You all may remember that -- when people we're flying across the country, they learned their plane was becoming a weapon. They told their loved ones good-bye. They said a prayer. One guy said, "Let's roll." And they made the ultimate sacrifice. They served something greater than themselves in life.

That's happening all across America. Obviously, that example is the most vivid of them all. But out of the evil done to America is coming a culture of personal responsibility that allows me to boldly predict that we're much more likely now to bring hope where there's no hope, light where there's darkness, and to make sure this American experience is available for all. It's going to happen, because we are the greatest nation on the face of the earth. And it is my honor to be the President of such a nation.

Thank you for coming. (Applause.)

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