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President Bush Thanks Homeland Security Workers

Remarks by the President to Federal Employees on Homeland Security
DAR Constitution Hall
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President's Remarks

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all very much. Please, be seated. Thank you. Thanks for that warm welcome. It's such a pleasure to be here today, and I want to thank you all for coming.

I'm here to thank each one of you for your dedication to the country we all love. You worked hard prior to September the 11th; you're working really hard now. And the American people appreciate it a lot, and so do I.

You know, the amazing thing about America is our nation is stronger today than it was before the enemy hit. I like to remind people, they must have not understood who they were dealing with. (Applause.) They probably thought we might file a lawsuit or two -- (laughter) -- but they didn't understand the character of the American people, the strength and resolve of our great land to defend that which we hold dear, which is freedom.

Nor did they understand the energy and drive of the people who work on behalf of the American people to do everything we can -- and I say "we" -- we can -- to protect and guard our people. And that's what's happening today in America, and I want to thank you for your dedication.

And we've got to do more. We've got to move forward. We've got to seize the moment to do everything we can to assure the American people that our government and the fine folks who work on behalf of the taxpayers are working a smart way, a dedicated way. And today I want to talk some about the creation of the Department of Homeland Security and why it's important to our country.

And I call upon your continued sense of duty to our country, as we develop the new plans. Oh, it's not going to be easy, and the challenges are going to be great. But there's no doubt in my mind that we'll do what's necessary -- do what's necessary -- to protect America.

I want to thank Chung for her introduction. Backstage, we had a picture taken. I said, only in America. Only in America do we have somebody as dedicated as people like Chung, who are willing to sacrifice on behalf of the United States of America, use their time and talent and energy like everybody in this hall to work for others. So, Chung, thanks for your hard work, thanks for your dedication to your job, and thanks for representing the good folks in this hall. (Applause.)

When I go back to Crawford, people say -- or I see my friends from Texas, they say, gosh, it must be hard to be the President. I say, well, not really, if you've got a good team. And I've put together a great team. You all are a part of that team.

Today, some of the generals of the team are here, people such as Tom Ridge, who is advisor to Homeland Security. He's done a great job. He left being the governor of the great state of Pennsylvania to come and serve the nation, and I want to thank you, Tom, for your dedication to the country. (Applause.)

Some of my Cabinet members are here. The Secretary of State of the United States of America, Colin Powell. (Applause.) Our great Attorney General, John Ashcroft, is here. (Applause.) The Secretary of Agriculture, Ann

Veneman, is here. (Applause.) Secretary of Transportation, Norm Mineta. (Applause.) The Energy Secretary, Spence Abraham, is here. Thank you for being here, Spence. (Applause.) Christie Todd Whitman, who runs the EPA, is with us today. Thank you, Christie Todd. (Applause.) The prettiest person in our administration -- (laughter) -- of FEMA, Joe Allbaugh. (Applause.)

I want to thank Kay James, who's the Director of Office of Personnel Management for coming. I appreciate you being here, Kay. (Applause.) I know Stephen Perry of the GSA is here. I see Brian Stafford, who's running the Secret Service. I see the head of the Coast Guard; I see Magaw, John Magaw. Thank you all for coming. I appreciate you all being here. (Applause.)

And I want to thank the members of Congress who are here. I appreciate you working with us. I appreciate you're here to celebrate the dedication of the fine people that we're fortunate enough to have working in our government.

You know, the threats we face are real. I mean, it is real. I like to remind people that I'm an early morning guy. I get to the Oval Office about -- oh, generally about 6:50 a.m. or so. It's not a very long commute. (Laughter.) And I sit at the great desk that other Presidents have used -- Teddy and Frank, and -- I can call them that, since -- (laughter).

And Spot the dog comes in with me, and I read a threat assessment. The fact that the enemy is still interested in hurting America, I read that every morning. And I take it seriously, and I know you do as well. This is a threat that not only affects America, it affects anybody who loves freedom, anybody who's willing to stand up and say we value freedom, we value the freedom for people to worship the way they want to or speak their mind or to print an article the way they want to print it. And the people who stand up for freedom, they're going to be threatened by these killers.

And it's time for us to continue to act decisively and to be patient and to be resolute. It means all the parts of our government must continue to cooperate. And you all have done that and I want to thank you for the level of cooperation that has taken place in a fragmented government. It's a -- and we're making progress, we really are. First, we're hunting down the killers wherever they try to hide and we're bringing them to justice.

Sometimes you'll read about it in your newspapers or see it on the -- you know, on all these TV shows. And sometimes you won't. But what is for certain is we've got a great military who are doing everything they can to hunt the killers down, one person at a time, and bring them to justice. And that's exactly what this government will continue to do. (Applause.)

These are shadowy killers, and we're treating them just as they are -- as international crooks, international criminals. And they'll -- you know, these are the kind of folks that will slip into a city and try to hide, or they'll go to a cave and then they'll send some youngster to his death. And they, themselves, of course, won't choose that route, for some reason. They don't want to show up, because they know if they show up we'll get them. And it's just a matter of time. It's just a matter of time.

They made a mistake; they attacked a great nation. And this nation will do whatever it takes to defend freedom and to bring people to justice. (Applause.)

We're making progress overseas, we're making progress at home. We strengthened our aviation security and we're tightening our borders. We're stockpiling medicines to defend against bioterrorism. We're improving information-sharing amongst our intelligence agencies. We're taking new steps to protect critical infrastructure. But the important thing for the American people to know is that our public servants are working longer hours and working harder and working smarter to defend the American people.

We will win the war on terror -- no doubt in my mind -- thanks to the heroism of our fighting troops, and thanks to the patriotism of our people, and thanks to the hard work of government officials here at home. There have been some extraordinary stories about some in your ranks -- many in your ranks. And I want to share some of the stories with you so the American people fully understand the dedication of the people throughout our government.

Tom Armas is a Special Agent in the Secret Service. On September the 11th, after helping to evacuate the Agency's New York Field Office at Seven World Trade Center, he proceeded into the damaged North Tower, and up the

stairwell to the 40th floor, where he worked to help the seriously wounded.

After being turned back by raging fire, he continued his efforts in the North Tower lobby, and then on the street. Eventually, Tom was forced to evacuate the area because of thick smoke and, of course, falling debris. Yet, even while leaving, he continued to help others. In the midst of chaos, he was a calm and steady soldier, at one point carrying a woman to the safety of a nearby emergency vehicle.

You see, this is the meaning of public service, as you all have shown the American people. A willingness to go the limit, and then some more, for the sake of your fellow citizens. Tom, thank you very much for your service to the country. (Applause.)

David Hart has been a FEMA Individual Assistance reservist for many years. He had a variety of responsibilities related to September the 11th in New York, including making sure that victims received assistance quickly; make sure that there was staffing at the assistance centers, and that there was proper training for people who were willing to help.

Throughout this emergency, David was responsible for monitoring the individual assistance programs. He worked with the contract inspectors and others, and was a troubleshooter for a wide variety of problems.

He performed with great skill, and boundless determination. He showed compassion to people in need. He put the best face on our government for people who suffered. And David, we appreciate your service to America as well. (Applause.)

We serve our citizens in all kinds of ways, in different methods. Take, for example, the story of Chantice James. It's a really interesting story, because she is one of the first U.S. Customs inspectors ever to work abroad for the sole purpose of protecting America and other countries from weapons of mass destruction -- weapons of mass destruction that could be concealed in cargo.

We take these threats very seriously. We worry about weapons of mass destruction. And so we've asked Chantice James to leave her family, to move to Vancouver, Canada, where she's been for the past five months. She and her Canadian counterparts are reviewing all shipments ultimately destined for the United States that comes through that port. She has assisted in training additional U.S. Customs inspectors, sharing her skill and talent and knowledge, who are now deployed in Halifax and Montreal. She's developing techniques that will be used around the world. She's using her time and talent and efforts to help us assure the American people that we're doing everything we can to protect the homeland. And, Chantice, thank you for your service, as well. (Applause.)

These are just some of the examples of the extraordinary service that's taking place. You probably have got your own stories to tell. You've got examples of people, perhaps yourself, who have taken an extra step on behalf of the American people, and I want to thank you for that, and so do the American people. You see, we're all part of the war on terror, and that's what's important to understand, a new kind of war.

This is an historic campaign. It's a little different. But it does point up the fact that public service in America today is not just another job. It is an important act of citizenship. It is a way to fulfill our obligation to those who have gone before us, to those who will follow us, and to those who have sacrificed and died for us. That's how I view your job, and my job.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to those public servants who I like to say quietly stand guard on the ramparts of freedom. We owe something else, as well. We owe all of you a concerted effort to do what it takes to make your efforts more effective. And that's why I proposed the Department of Homeland Security.

At present, there are over 100 different federal agencies with a role in what we call homeland security. And that means, despite everybody's best intentions and hard work and sacrifice, there is a dispersal of authority, a lack of accountability, and the truth of the matter is, a needless drain on critical resources. There's, to put it bluntly, an overlap of administration, a duplication of administration.

And Congress -- and so that's why I did what I did. And I understand it's hard to make changes in Washington, D.C.

I understand that people kind of get set in their ways and want to guard turf, and I know that. But there is an overriding and urgent mission here in America today, and that's to protect our homeland. We have been called into action, and we've got to act.

The Department of Homeland Security will foster a new culture in the nation's capital. It will be a culture of cooperation. Sure, there's cooperation now. But when you've got 100 agencies dispersed throughout Washington, we can do a better job of cooperation. By uniting essential agencies that will work closely together, it will give new tools to meet new challenges. It will help set priority. Listen, all of you are in agencies that have got more than one priority, but the single most important priority is to protect the homeland now in America. We're at war.

We're in a different kind of war than we're used to. There'll be moments where it seems like we're not at war. But we're at war until we win. And, therefore, we must do everything we can to funnel resources and to set priorities to protect the American people. It is by far our most important challenge.

The Department of Homeland Security will be charged with four primary tasks: to control our borders and prevent terrorists and weapons from entering the country -- listen, we need to know who's coming in, and why they're coming in, and if they're leaving, when they're supposed to be leaving. And if they're not leaving, we need to know why they're not leaving. (Applause.)

We need to work with state and local -- we will work with state and local authorities to respond quickly and effectively to emergencies, and that's important. All levels of government must work together.

We'll bring our best scientists and develop technologies to detect biological, chemical and nuclear weapons, and to develop the drugs and treatments necessary to protect our citizens. This is an historic opportunity, not only to deal with the immediate, but to leave a legacy of better medicines and better cures on behalf of the American people.

And, finally, for the first time, this new department will merge under one roof the capability to identify and assess threats to the homeland, to map those threats against our vulnerabilities, and to do what's necessary to secure America.

Congress is reacting positively to the initiative, and I want to thank the members of Congress. See, this isn't a Republican idea, this isn't a Democrat idea. This is an American idea that makes sense for all Americans. (Applause.)

I understand the challenges that we face. I accept the challenges. I'm not going to let it stop us, and neither should you. This is the most significant reorganization since 1947 -- of government -- when President Harry Truman decided to reorganize the Defense Department. Congress, as they work with us, must give us the flexibility necessary to achieve our objectives. I call it freedom to manage.

The new department must be able to get the right people in the right place at the right time with the right pay. We need to be able to reward excellence and ensure accountability for individual performance. A lot will be expected of us, and I expect Congress to give the executive branch the -- give us the flexibility necessary to achieve our objectives.

I'm here to let you know that there's no question in my mind we can achieve what we need to achieve, particularly when we work together. I want you to think about the Department of Homeland Security in this sense. Twenty years from now, if we're still standing -- individually, that is -- you can look back and say, I was part of not only winning the war on terror, but I was part of working together to leave behind a legacy, a legacy of a more secure homeland so a future President or a future Congress or a future agency head can better address the true threats of the 21st century that will face our children and our children's children. That's really what we're talking about today.

This is an historic moment, a fantastic opportunity. History has called us into action. History has put the spotlight on America. History has -- people are saying, what is this country all about? Well, I'll tell you what we're about. We're going to do what's necessary to say -- to do our most important job. We are can-do people. We see a problem, this is a country that works to solve it. And that's what's going to happen, thanks to your hard work and dedication.

And I'll tell you what else is going to happen. We're going to win the war on terror, no matter how long it takes. It is

a -- first of all, we do what we do because there's others coming up in our society. The dedication and sacrifice you all make is because you understand that you're working for other people, particularly young -- youngsters, youngsters who want to enjoy the same life we have in America, a life of freedom, a life -- a chance to realize your dreams.

And we're doing what we're doing because you all understand that a full life is one that serves something greater than yourself, otherwise you wouldn't have signed on for government service in the first place.

I believe the culture in the country is changing. Oh, I know there's a lot of folks that worry only about themselves and their balance sheets and how well they're doing. But I do believe that, as a result of the evil done to America, a lot of Americans are stepping back and taking a hard look at what's important in life.

They remember the example of Flight 93, average Americans flying across the country. They learned their plane would become a weapon. They told their loved ones they loved them and goodbye, they said a prayer, and they drove the plane in the ground. The ultimate symbol of serving something greater than yourself, the ultimate act of sacrifice, to serve somebody and something, a cause greater than themselves.

And that's what we're here talking about today -- good, honorable, honest Americans working hard to serve something greater than yourself. And that something is the greatest country on the face of the earth.

Thank you for your sacrifice. God bless you all. (Applause.)

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