

Director Ridge Addresses U.S. Conference of Mayors

Release Date: 09/26/02 00:00:00

For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
September 26, 2002

Remarks by Homeland Security Advisor Tom Ridge on the Department of Homeland Security

Indian Treaty Room

Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building

7:50 A.M. EDT

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Thank you. You're up bright and early. Early mayor gets the funding, is that the -- rather, the work. (Laughter.) Good job, all right. It's a good sign, it's a good sign.

Well, thank you very much for coming back to Washington. Thank you very much for taking the time with us today, I know you've got a busy schedule. You've got some speakers here, you're going up to Capitol Hill. And there are a couple issues I'd like to raise with you that are relevant to your visit to Washington and your visit to the legislative branch of the government.

So what I'd like to do is to share a couple thoughts with you this morning, and then we'll break into a little question and answer period, if it's all right with you.

Actually, you know, we have spoken with one another and shared ideas many times over the course of the past year. I must tell, your arrival in town today is critical. You've arrived at precisely the moment that the Office of Homeland Security needs your support and needs your advocacy.

The United States Senate is debating the largest the government reorganization since President Harry S. Truman reorganized our national security apparatus to meet the Soviet threat. The threat now of course is terrorism.

President Truman had a sign on his desk that said "the buck stops here." I think the mayors have the same sign on their desk -- sometimes you probably feel like you've got a target on your back, too. That whole notion that the buck stops here, the notion that people are held accountable, that's a message that resonates with your constituents. It resonates with the American people.

Most Americans, I believe, want their President to act in the best interests of the nation, certainly in the interests of national security -- particularly when our nation is at war. And I think we all agree we are at war; the newest threat of the 21st century is the threat of international terrorism. They want a government that is aggressive, but accountable, starting at the top.

So I think Americans would be curious to know why the Senate is on the verge of passing a bill that actually rolls back -- this bill actually rolls back and limits -- the President's ability to act on behalf of national security. Instead of "the buck stops here," the Breaux-Nelson-Chafee amendment divides the buck and passes the buck.

Now, I do not question the motives of members of the United States Senate. They are capable, dedicated, and patriotic public servants. But somehow, legislation to defend all Americans from terrorism has turned into a vehicle that some of the members want to use to roll back authorities that have been vested in Presidents for over 40 years -- national security discretions, national security authorities, that have existed since President Kennedy.

In 1962, President Kennedy allowed federal employees to unionize for the first time. President Kennedy realized -- and I think it's important to note, the unions realized -- that sometimes legitimate national security needs would override collective bargaining agreements. President Carter was the first to use this authority.

And every President since President Carter, including President Clinton, has followed his lead.

So why, in the middle of the war against terrorism -- we're smack-dab in the middle of the war against terrorism, in the middle of the consideration of the largest reorganization and restructuring of the executive branch since President Truman -- are we on the verge of weakening and limiting a President's authority? And it's not just for this President, but for future Presidents.

Why are we about to give a couple of special interests -- and again, look, as someone who used to carry a union card, someone who believes in the rights of organized labor and collective bargaining, why is it this time, in this bill, that a few folks in this town think it's more important to either reach out or embrace that notion of supporting collective bargaining agreements in the face of 40 years' worth of history that has always given the President the discretion to waive the Federal Labor Relations Act in the interests of national security? Why this time? Why this bill? Particularly in the middle of our war on terror.

Now, I commend the Senators. There are a couple Senators up there who are working very, very hard, working diligently to find a solution. You know, everybody's trying to find a compromise. But Breaux-Nelson is not the compromise, ladies and gentlemen. A time of war is no time to limit the President's ability to protect national security.

Americans expect the new Department of Homeland Security to be able to respond quickly to the new threat. The bipartisan legislation passed by the House, and the bipartisan Miller-Gramm bill in the Senate, will do just that. We're trying to keep it bipartisan; we need to keep it bipartisan. I think senators on both sides of the aisle want it to be bipartisan. The President wants it to be bipartisan.

But the Breaux-Nelson amendment doesn't -- doesn't get us to where we need to be. Americans expect the new department to have the same national security authority as other federal agencies, not less. Actually, the President would have less authority to move people around in a new Department of Homeland Security than he would over at the Department of Agriculture, over at the Veterans Affairs. Over at the Department of Commerce. Less authority.

One could argue that if you look at the language of Breaux-Nelson -- really, there's no authority left. The House passed legislation in the Miller-Gramm compromise, give that authority to the department; the Breaux-Nelson amendment takes the authority away. Americans expect the new department to cut through red tape so the very best people can be hired and placed in the right jobs, with the right pay. The House passed legislation and the Miller-Gramm compromise gives the department those tools. The Breaux-Nelson amendment, on the other hand, does not.

President Truman told Congress that the key to better government is a general clarification of the lines of authority and responsibility within the executive branch. Mayors understand that. You've got a direct line of responsibility, you have a direct line of accountability. The Breaux-Nelson amendment does not clarify lines of authority -- frankly, it adds very complicating language and conditions to the exercise of that authority. Frankly, I think it shrouds the new department in a fog of words.

Time is of the essence in this debate. Both the time it takes to respond to terrorism and the time it takes to create a new department. It has been over three months since the President sent his initiative to the Congress. The House had in place their procedure. They had the committees involved, sent a measure to the floor of the House of Representatives. It was debated and passed rather quickly, and with strong bipartisan support. We're still awaiting the Senate to do the same thing. The President is anxious to get to his desk a bill, a measure, that he can sign, retaining the presidential discretion that his predecessors since Kennedy, President Kennedy, retained. Not asking to do anything different. Just don't take the authority away in the middle of a discussion of the creation of the new Department of Homeland Security, in the middle of the war against international terrorism. This is not the time to reduce the President's authority to act in the best interests of this country.

While the President awaits a bill, mayors and first responders await funding for equipment, training for weapons of mass destruction drill and exercises, and other homeland security priorities. We've had quite a few discussions about the \$3.5 billion that the President sent to the Hill in the form of his recommendation in the budget. It goes without saying that the House passed their budget, but we're still waiting for the Senate to pass theirs. This debate may be occurring in Washington, but it affects every city and state and county in this country.

I'm going to give you an example about the challenges the President has, and the country has, and why we

feel so strongly about the need to preserve the President's discretion. In the days following September 11th, the United States Customs Service asked its inspectors at our nation's port of entry to wear radiation-detection badges.

We're at war against terrorists. We have 5.7 million containers that come across, because of commercial international shipping, into our ports. It is legitimately perceived as a potential vulnerability. We are concerned about weapons of mass destruction.

And so Customs acquired these individual radiation-detection devices and wants to use them. The union governing those workers initially refused, saying they wanted the use of these individual radiation detection devices to be voluntary. You know, I happen to think there's probably a huge disconnect between the folks who represent their interest in Washington, D.C. and these patriotic men and women who serve us in our borders and our ports.

I've been with them, I've seen them -- patriots, all. And there's no doubt in my mind if you asked the member of that union, if you asked them whether or not they'd be willing to wear it, they'd say: yes, sir, yes, ma'am; I'm a patriot, it's part of my job; we know there's a vulnerability here, give me the device. They're patriots, all. I think there's a disconnect, frankly, between the men and women we have out there in the front lines and some of the thinking that goes on in this town by the people who represent -- the union governing these workers refused, saying it should be voluntary.

Had the union not backed down, it could have taken at least a year to resolve. By then, of course, a terrorist threat would have passed or, worse, been even carried out.

But here's an interesting observation I'd like to share with you. The President didn't need to exercise the authority that some members of the Senate want to take away from the President -- the mere fact that it existed, and they knew it existed, probably over a period of time changed their point of view, so that now they're wearing the pagers.

Homeland security does not happen in a vacuum. These are your cities and towns and communities we're talking about. Some of you represent port cities. I think you'd want the federal employees with access to these devices to arm themselves and, therefore, better protect themselves, the ports, your communities and your citizens. And I doubt very seriously whether you'd want to give them the option to wear them, or whether you thought it should be voluntary.

You've heard me say this many times before, but I think if the hometown is secure, then the homeland is secure. And these rules will affect your ability to secure your hometowns.

Now, the nation's mayors need these tools and you need those funds. And the sooner we resolve this debate, the sooner Congress can pass the President's budget, which we know doubles spending for homeland security. The sooner the budget is passed, the faster your cities can gear up to meet the threat.

As government executives yourselves, I urge you to help shape this debate. I'm going to put it, if I might -- because you serve your communities in an executive capacity, I'd like to put it in your context, what you do on a day to day basis -- and understand, this is basically what the President has to do in a larger context. Ask yourselves if you want less authority to act on behalf of public safety, or more. Do you want less authority to act on behalf of public safety, or would you like to have more? You'd certainly like to preserve what you have now and not have the city council take it away from you. And ask yourself, would you like more limits and conditions on city hall, or fewer? Everybody that wants more limits on your discretion, more limits on your power, authority, please raise your hand.

I think if you answered that question, when you go to the Hill I hope you ask -- let your senators know how you feel. There are a lot of other contentious issues in this bill, we're trying to work them out. It's just inconceivable, almost incomprehensible to me that this time, in this bill they want to roll back the President's authority and discretion in this matter.

I tell you what, I think together, working with you and other units of government that we have made great progress since September 11, 2001. We've increased security -- I know you've worked hard every day to harden your targets, to assess vulnerabilities. I know you've committed manpower and resources to doing what you needed to do to upgrade security in your communities. And we're grateful for that.

Working with Congress, we've helped cities and counties and states improve their defenses against terrorism,

particularly bioterrorism. Again, we've got great bipartisan support on some of the money issues that have been raised with the Congress of the United States, in both chambers. And I think we have built new and lasting partnerships at every level of government and the private sector.

And I know we've had some differences of opinion with regard to maybe how the money should flow. But I'll tell you what: the one thing that we respect and admire, in terms of the relationship of the Office of Homeland Security with your organization, is we always know where you stand. And some of my most intense disagreements are with my best friends, because if you can't have candor, if you can't have honest debate and honest differences of opinion, you'll never advance the ball.

And we've had some differences of opinion, and we will, undoubtedly. But the fact is, is that you've responded to our call. Many of you have adopted the National Threat Advisory System; two-thirds of the cities, when we went from an elevated level to a high level, adjusted accordingly.

We view you as invaluable, priceless partners as we effect a national strategy and a national plan and build on national infrastructure together in our war against international terrorism.

The next step that I'd like to see us move together on -- notwithstanding any other differences of opinion we might have -- starts with the creation of a Department of Homeland Security, and getting a bill to the President that he can sign. I think with your help, we can get it done.

I want to thank you very much again for convening so early this morning, and wish you well today in your discussions, both within your organization and with the Congress of the United States. And again, thank you for your service to your community, and thank you for your service to this country. I'm grateful to be part of it with you. Thank you. (Applause.)

END 8:08 A.M. EDT

This page was last modified on 09/26/02 00:00:00