



For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
April 11, 2002

Remarks by Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge to the American Society of Newspaper Editors

Washington, DC

As Prepared for Delivery

I think all Americans have a greater appreciation for the service you provide because of September 11th and the days and weeks that followed. As the nation collectively moved from shock, to grief, to lingering uncertainty, newspapers helped us understand and cope with our new circumstances.

"A newspaper can drop the same thought into a thousand minds at the same moment," said Alexis de Tocqueville. "To suppose that they only serve to protect freedom would be to diminish their importance; they maintain civilization."

Today, civilization itself is under attack. That fact was brutally brought home when one of your own, Daniel Pearl, was killed in barbaric fashion, simply for doing his job representing a free press and a free nation.

We're in a two-front war against terrorism - one overseas, and one here at home. But a newspaper can do much more than bring the problems of the world literally to our doorsteps. It can offer solutions - stir people to action - and calm a nation's fears. All three are necessary to homeland security.

As a nation, we have learned a great deal about what it will take to secure our homeland in the six months since President Bush signed the Executive Order creating this office.

Homeland security encompasses the food we eat and water we drink; the air we breathe; the energy we use; the banking and finance systems that ensure our prosperity; our transportation and public health systems; and the new frontier of cyberspace.

The challenge is vast. But we are making real progress.

I wish every American could see what I see -- the round-the-clock work being done by millions of talented people in the private sector and at all levels of government. I've had the privilege of meeting many of them over the past six months:

The Cincinnati firefighters who, with private support, have built a world-class urban search and rescue team. Florida's model preparedness effort, based on lessons learned from Hurricane Andrew. Winston-Salem's enthusiastic community involvement. El Paso's border agents who are using new technologies to keep terrorists out, while enabling cross-border commerce and tourism to continued.

If you want to see the progress we've made on securing the homeland, look no further than your hometowns.

But since I'm speaking to you as representative of the Administration, let me directly address what the federal government has done to date.

We launched the largest criminal investigation in history. Passed the USA PATRIOT Act to bring federal law into the Information Age. Put hundreds of air marshals on our planes and new federal screeners in our airports. Deployed the National Guard to protect the border. Refocused the mission of the Coast Guard toward defending our coastline. Distributed more than a billion dollars to states' public health systems to build up their bioterror response. Acquired more than a billion doses of antibiotics. Stepped up security at our national monuments and

nuclear power plants. Conducted a top-to-bottom security review of our entire energy infrastructure. Created the Homeland Security Advisory System, which has garnered widespread praise from first responders and law enforcement. And led a team of federal, local and state experts to give the world the most secure Olympic Winter Games ever.

These are just some of the actions that the federal government has taken to plug the immediate gaps. More -- much more -- remains to be done.

You've reported on some of the remaining challenges - from long lines and security breaches at our airports to the possibilities of attacks on our infrastructure.

You've sparked a public conversation about the more controversial issues: How long should visitors to this nation stay? Should airline pilots carry guns? Should sensitive information be taken down from the Internet? Should changes be made to the FOIA?

A careful balance needs to be struck. Tough judgment calls have to be made if we are to secure our homeland and preserve our national principles and values. But we will not, as Ben Franklin said, trade away our essential liberty in the process.

As a free and open and welcoming society, we always be at risk. We can never totally eliminate it -- but we are working every day and using every resource at our disposal to reduce it.

President Bush's homeland security budget has received widespread bipartisan support.

It nearly doubles our investment from the previous year, in support of four important goals: a thousand-percent increase for our "first responders"; creating "smart borders"; building up our nation's biodefense capability; and promoting information-sharing and technology throughout all levels of government.

These four priorities were chosen for their ability to reduce the risk of an attack, and the chance of casualties should one occur. But there was a third reason.

Homeland security is a national, not just a federal effort. The tone can be set in Washington. But the real day-to-day work will be done in the 50 states and four territories, 3,000 counties and 18,000 municipalities of this great nation. That's where the front lines in this war on terrorism lie.

These are the people who will respond to the next crisis - and who will make the critical budget decisions on homeland security for years to come.

This budget was guided not by how much we could spend, but by some basic principles that will help these front-line "soldiers" do their job.

First, the importance of planning. That cannot be overemphasized. Our national strategy will rely on the strategies of the states and the territories, which in turn rely on the plans of localities. All the pieces must fit together if we are to have a seamless national strategy.

That is why one-fourth of the budget proposed for first responders will go to emergency management agencies -- the folks charged with developing the statewide plans.

Next, coordination. A crisis is no time to exchange business cards for the first time! Our budget encourages mutual aid agreements, which are critical to an effective response. If first responders cannot communicate with one another across agency or state lines, they lose precious time.

Third, practice and drilling. It's the only way to identify the gaps in our response. In homeland security, practice doesn't just make perfect, practice saves lives.

Fourth, cooperation. Our Budget will start knocking down those information "stovepipes" within government and

turn them into information pipelines so people can do their jobs.

Finally, partnerships. When we match the resources of the public sector, the innovation and energy of the private sector and the research of academia, no problem is too great to overcome.

Occasionally, a member of the press asks me if I'm concerned that people are starting to tune out the homeland security message. Let me put it another way: in the absence of another incident, can we maintain the political will to continue? I tell them that's a very good question. The answer is: we can never again afford to be complacent.

The threat is real. America's towering skyscrapers, bustling cities, modern transportation systems and intricate infrastructure make us a target - and so do our constitutionally granted freedoms.

Every year, the power of technology spreads to new individuals and organizations. That's good, because it means economic growth and social advances. But it also means that terrorists have new powers to do us harm. And it makes our vulnerability a permanent condition.

So we must stay strong -- stay alert - and stay the course.

I urge newspapers to keep writing the stories that help the American people understand the risk, what we're doing to reduce the risk, and, just as importantly, what they can do to help.

Henry Luce was once asked "What is the purpose of the press?" His answer was "Res Publica" -- public affairs. You are an important part of the homeland security dialogue, and I pledge to engage constructively with you in the days and weeks ahead -- just as we are doing today.

It is not the role of the press to be cheerleaders of government. Your role is to provide the public with solid, honest, objective information to help guide their lives. To inform them and educate them about the risk of terrorism, without underreaction or overreaction.

A spirited free press that asks difficult questions may be seen by our enemies as a weakness. But it is a great strength. Keep prodding, keep analyzing, and keep educating your fellow citizens. That is the best way to answer the enemies of America and freedom.

And what, in the end, will be the payoff? The President believes, and I agree, that it's not just a safer, more secure America. It's a better and a stronger America.

A nation better able to respond to natural disasters. A nation with a revitalized public health system, equipped to fight Mother Nature's worst diseases, not just man's. A nation creating good, high-paying jobs thanks to increased trade with Canada and Mexico. A nation that is more welcoming to her law-abiding immigrants.

My fondest hope is that homeland security can help spark a renewed sense of national purpose and citizenship. We no longer have the luxury of assuming that the security of our nation is somebody else's problem.

More than 28,000 Americans have signed up for the President's new Citizen Corps program. They will be making a direct contribution to homeland security. Perhaps they will also be inspired to attend a PTA meeting or to mentor a young student or to vote - or, at the very least, to pick up a newspaper and learn about the outside world.

In the 1950s, Americans dug fallout shelters and ducked under their desks. Today, Americans are emerging in their communities, fighting evil with acts of compassion.

Democracy is not a spectator sport. We all have a contribution to make. Thank you for making yours.

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