Remarks by Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge at the National Association of Counties Annual Legislative Conference

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SECRETARY RIDGE: Thank you. It's a pleasure to speak to the leaders of the nation's counties once again, as we celebrate the Department of Homeland Security's first anniversary. The last time we met formally was when the Department was a few days old. Of course, that was hardly the last time we spoke with one another.

In fact, we've held many productive meetings together since the very first session of your Homeland Security Task Force more than two years ago. And that's precisely the point.

Today we are more secure and better prepared as counties -- and as a country -- than we were a year ago. And integral to that success has been our strong partnership. I will be happy to talk about that progress, as well as our vision for 2004 and beyond. But before we look forward I want to look back -- way back, to our Founding Fathers.

Our very existence is their legacy. For our Founders gave us something extremely rare in human history, a Constitution that did not tell people what they could do, but rather what the Government was allowed to do. All other powers and rights were reserved to the states and to the people, respectively. Or, as James Madison put it, "The powers delegated...to the federal government are few and defined; those which are to remain in the state governments are numerous and indefinite."

This is especially important to remember at a time when we face a determined, aggressive foreign enemy who wishes to see our destruction. Our Founders faced such an enemy -- and so do we, today.

The enormous challenge of protecting Americans from terrorism requires a nationwide effort. The attacks of 9-11 required a whole new philosophy of how we secure the country, a philosophy of shared responsibility, shared accountability and shared leadership--in short, a renewed commitment to federalism.

Washington will help lead this effort, but we will not micro-manage it. Instead, homeland security must be the priority of every county official, Governor, Mayor, township supervisor, Tribal Leader, first responder, business owner, school board member and citizen.

We seek nothing less than the integration of a nation--one connected country, one united people, one secure homeland. And ladies and gentlemen, together we have made great progress toward that goal--and the National Association of Counties has been a true partner in that progress. In Washington, we set an example with the largest, most complex government integration since the Truman administration.

One hundred and eighty-thousand employees from 22 agencies, each with its own culture, had to be merged into one new entity -- the biggest change management challenge of all time.

Many in Washington said it couldn't be done. But we had the will to unify. Today we wear many uniforms but one patch -- the seal of the Department of Homeland Security. Separate bureaus that once seldom interacted now pool their strengths and pull their oars in the same direction.

We also fought for and won from Congress a 21st Century managerial system so we could quickly assign workers and resources to wherever they were needed. The Department has to be agile enough to meet the ever-changing threat. And it is.

While we have been integrating, we have not stopped making America safer.

Air security was improved from the curbside to the cockpit -- with tens of thousands of highly trained screeners, hundreds of federal air marshals, random inspections of air cargo and secured cockpit doors. New layers of security were built around our ports and coastline -- with Customs and Border Protection inspectors posted thousands of miles away at foreign ports, to safely screen and label U.S.-bound containers.

"Smart border" agreements with Mexico and Canada were signed and new inspectors and new technology deployed to stop terrorists without slowing legitimate commerce and travel. A billion doses of antibiotics and vaccines were stockpiled and mobile "push-packs" deployed so our communities would never be left unprepared for a biological attack.

All of this is good news. But our mission is larger than any single measure. Our mission is: "to lead the unified
national effort to secure America," to "prevent and deter terrorist attacks and protect against and respond to threats and hazards to the nation." That, in fact, is our Department's Mission Statement.

New people, funds and technology will not be enough to turn those words into actions. It will take hard work, strong partnerships -- and a will to unify.

Today I am pleased to announce a true example of that partnership and collaboration -- the National Incident Management System, or NIMS.

[Notice it's not called FIMS -- the "Federal Incident Management System!"]

The NIMS is the nation's first-ever standardized management plan, a framework to create a unified command system for federal, state and local governments and the response community.

Under NIMS, all levels of government will share a common set of terminologies, protocols and processes to ensure a seamless, coordinated response. It puts into practice the concept of "one mission, one team, one fight" -- no matter what level of government.

Counties especially know the time-consuming effort it takes to coordinate responses across jurisdictional and geographic lines. Tricky issues of credentialing, interoperability and liability can slow down even the most rapid response.

First responders are often the first on the scene and the last to leave, and their ability to communicate and work together is paramount.

We saw what incompatibility could mean on 9-11.

Fire chiefs standing 50 yards from one another couldn't communicate by radio; some firefighters from neighboring jurisdictions were unable to even attach their hoses to the hydrants.

The National Incident Management System will act as a template for our National Response Plan. It provides a set of standardized response structures, based in part on the Incident Command System, and gives emergency responders and managers a common operating picture from which to work.

We're making progress to develop standards that fit into the NIMS framework. The Department has already identified technical specifications for a baseline interoperable communications system as the short-term solution to allow first responders to communicate by voice, no matter what frequency they're on or mode they use.

Last week we announced the first standards regarding personal protective equipment, in order to protect first responders against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear hazards.

These standards, which will assist state and local procurement officials and manufacturers, are intended to provide emergency personnel with the best available protective gear.

Of course, before first responders and emergency managers can hear one another, they must be heard from. As we developed NIMS, our state, local and tribal government team did a wonderful job to make sure everyone had a seat at the table and all voices were heard.

I could go on -- but better to quote the participants themselves.

One said, "The process was gratifying; the homeland security staff was very receptive to our comments."

Another said he was "surprised by how much people listened; the Department wanted our candid, honest opinion; they were really interested in making it work."

We appreciate those kind words. We realize that an inclusive, open process fosters cooperation and a "let's make it work" attitude. Because the NIMS framework will be used by everyone, everyone must have their say. And nearly everyone has.

Indeed, the final product reflects and respects many different views. Many said they did not want to see proven local emergency management procedures discarded or "reinvented"; indeed, such best practices have become the foundation of NIMS.

Above all, we sought a single, unified standard that could be applied to any crisis, no matter how large or how localized. The NIMS is designed to expand or contract based on the incident, giving first responders and incident management the flexibility to respond in the most efficient and effective manner.

It is a "dynamic capability," one that can be modified to meet future needs or leverage new technology. No longer can we be satisfied with "static capabilities" that cannot be improved to counter new threats, or isolated and illusionary.
we be satisfied with static capabilities that cannot be improved to counter new threats, or isolated and illusory "stovepipe" progress that grows taller without ever connecting.

NIMS is just one of many dynamic new tools we plan to unveil in the coming year.

To help border officials and law enforcement spot suspected terrorists, we are combining our "watch lists" into one fully integrated database, to be housed in the Terrorist Screening Center.

Our Homeland Security Information Network will provide constant "situational awareness" of potential terrorist incidents to officials in all 50 states, the territories and tribal governments.

And our new National Infrastructure Coordination Center and Unified National Database of Critical Infrastructure will do the same for business and industry helping them monitor 13 different infrastructure sectors.

All of these tools are part of the "new normal" that began after 9-11. We realize, however, that your "old normal" responsibilities didn't just disappear.

That's why we are forging an "all-hazards" response capability.

Over the past two years, we've awarded or made available eight billion dollars to first responders for anti-terrorism planning, training, equipment and exercises.

Yes, it has helped us prepare for terrorist attacks -- but it also helped us mobilize for Hurricane Isabel, the power outage and the fires in California.

We will also simplify the sometimes-complicated grant process with an integrated web page, a "one-stop shop" accessible by all government leaders.

The National Association of Counties' own surveys have found that some states have had difficulty drawing down grants, and that some localities were not familiar with the assessment process. We want to change this.

There is a great deal of grant money still available, and we want to get it to where it's needed as quickly as possible. Working with the National Association of Counties and our other friends at the state and local level, we will find solutions and best practices for distributing these billions of homeland security dollars.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have made measurable, visible, considerable progress. We've built new barriers to terrorists, and new bridges to one another.

And we've done so while remaining an open and welcoming nation to immigrants, visitors and students from across the world. Our Department's vision is not just to protect lives -- but to preserve our way of life from the terrorists who seek to destroy both.

At the end of the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin said we now have "a republic -- if we can keep it." The principles of federalism require that we work together, every single day, to keep it.

The principles of homeland security require it, too. We must not take our unity for granted. Instead, we must nurture it and apply it to the greatest challenge of our time.

The terrorists believe our freedom is a weakness, a vulnerability to be exploited. No. We must show them that it is a strength. With all of us united, everyone pledged to freedom's cause, everyone its protector, we will answer their threats, and prevent their attacks.

Thank you.