

Remarks by Secretary Tom Ridge at DHS Employees Event in Selfridge, Michigan

Release Date: 06/19/03 00:00:00

For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
June 19, 2003
** Remarks as Prepared **

I want to thank the Selfridge Air National Guard for allowing us the use of their base today. I might add that we will never forget the contributions made since 9-11 by members of the Army and Air National Guard to make our nation more secure and better prepared.

I want to also thank the Vice Commandant of the United States Coast Guard, Vice Admiral Thomas J. Barrett, as well as Ninth District Commander Rear Admiral Ronald Silva for attending.

Thank you all for coming today, and for taking a break from your sometimes - most of the time? - stressful jobs.

You all should be proud of your work. And now you will be able to wear that pride. Each of you has received a pin with the new Department of Homeland Security seal on it. Within the next few weeks, all 180,000-plus of the Department's employees will get one.

You'll notice that the seal features a shield with the three elements you work to protect: our land, sea and air. It also shows 22 stars, representing the 22 agencies from which you hailed, where many of you were protecting the homeland long before the Department came into existence.

Today, however, we're all on the same team -- one team, one fight, and one primary mission: to prevent terrorist attacks, reduce our vulnerability to an attack, and minimize loss of life and destruction should another attack occur on American soil.

As the President reminded us Tuesday, we are a nation at war. It is not a war we chose, but it is a war we will win. And until that day, as your pin card says, "We will answer history's call to protect America and preserve our way of life."

Despite our best efforts, despite the work we've done together to stand up this new Department, we cannot promise that the terrorists will not succeed someday in the future.

But we can say this: that the American people today are more secure and better prepared than ever before.

We are more aware of the threat, and more vigilant about confronting it.

We share more information with the people who need it, including intelligence and law enforcement, our state and local partners, and the private sector.

And we have devoted an unprecedented amount of resources, equipment and training to our "first preventers" and "first responders" across the land, who protect our hometowns by land, sea and air.

To date, we've made more than \$4 billion dollars available to states and cities to fight terrorism.

That includes more than \$42,000,000 to the State of Michigan, funds which can be used for planning, training, equipment and exercises. Some of the checks have already arrived. And if Congress passes the President's 2004 budget, another \$4 billion will be forthcoming - for a total of \$8 billion in state and local funding by the end of this year.

This additional funding will help get you the tools you need to detect, protect and prepare. But put terrorism aside for a moment. Every day, these tools help us become a stronger, more healthy and safer nation - shielded against crime, drug smuggling, natural disasters and disease.

Let's look at a typical day in homeland security:

On our waterways, you'll find the United States Coast Guard answering, on average, 192 distress calls, performing 109 search and rescue cases and saving 10 lives. And, I might add, teaching 500 boating safety courses, which may prevent some of the distress calls!

On a typical day you'll see the Coast Guard patrol 90 port security zones, aided by their new Defender Class Response Boats -- protecting not just the ports but nearby critical infrastructure such as chemical plants, refineries and bridges - the American way of life in microcosm.

At our airports, seaports and border crossings, our agents and inspectors - hundreds more than before 9-11 -- will process more than one million passengers, arriving in 323,000 vehicles, 580 vessels and 2,400 aircraft.

They will inspect 57,000 trucks and containers, using state-of-the-art scanners and detectors provided by this year's budget -- not to mention 1,200 dog teams, which technology can never replace!

They will seize nearly 5,000 pounds of narcotics, nearly half a million dollars in illegal merchandise, and more than \$700,000 in illegal currency on a typical day.

And they will apprehend more than 2,600 people trying to cross illegally into the United States. That number has gone down this year, perhaps because our improved security is sending the right message.

On a typical day, our TSA employees will screen about 1.5 million passengers before they board their aircraft.

And they will offer countless smiles to harried travelers, who have responded to these new security measures for the most part with patience and good cheer.

This is a day in the life of homeland security. It makes for a very bad day for criminals and smugglers, not to mention terrorists. And it makes all Americans very proud of the job you do -- and thankful that there are so many dedicated Americans willing to do it.

The Department's employees perform other duties not directly related to the terrorist threat, but are no less important to this nation.

For instance, we'll provide 1,000 students and school administrators with information on how to survive a tornado. We'll help communities save \$2.7 million in damage through flood plain management. And we'll help more than 200 Americans recover from disasters through low-interest loans, insurance and temporary housing.

Finally, we will naturalize, on average, 1,900 new citizens -- people drawn by the American way of life that you and I work so hard to protect.

That way of life is based on the individual - individuals with the freedom to make the right choices.

At the end of the day, that's what homeland security, comes down to as well. Individuals free to make decisions, but held accountable for them.

Individuals acting on training and instinct - but who need information and innovations from us.

The men and women of homeland security must make billions of decisions a year in order to keep terrorists from being successful even one time. We may use the latest science and technology in that effort - but they are our most valuable resource.

Diana Dean is one of them. In December 1999, U.S. Customs inspector Dean stopped a driver coming into the U.S. from Canada. He was driving the last car to come off of the last ferry that arrived that day in Port Angeles, Washington. Acting on her instincts and training, she noticed his suspicious behavior and unusual answers to her questions. She asked the driver to step out of his car and opened his trunk. What she found was the makings of a bomb - the Millennium bomb, as it's become known. Her action saved perhaps hundreds of lives and led to the capture of several al Qaeda cell members in the U.S.

At the end of a long and tiring day, her instincts were still sharp, and a terrible act was prevented.

Diana is a true American hero - but she'll probably tell you she was just doing her job. Diana now works, like

you, for the Department of Homeland Security -- and we're proud that she continues to "just do her job" for us.

Its proof that one person can make a difference. And 180,000 people with a variety of skills, working behind one primary mission, can make a huge difference.

The Department of Homeland Security will get you the tools and training you need to build new barriers to terrorists - and build new bridges to our many partners - the states and localities, business and industry, scientific community, schools and universities, and foreign governments, who are helping us catch terrorists, seize their funds and identify high-risk cargo long before they reach American shores.

We will put the right infrastructure in place to create a culture of excellence and we've a fabric of protection to make all Americans safer.

And we will focus the greatest resources on the greatest threats and vulnerabilities, so we can protect our way of life as well - as we're doing with Canada right now, working to create "smart borders" that keep terrorists out but do not stem the flow of commerce or legitimate travel.

It all adds up to a Department that is "ready, not waiting," and certainly not afraid.

One of our first challenges, as you know, is to build a model human resources system. We take this very seriously.

Today's event is part of a nine-city regional town hall meeting tour for employees and their representatives. We will sit down with employees and listen to your needs so we can present a full range of options to the Senior Review Committee later this year for recommendations.

I have no doubt you will give us great ideas -- and that together, we will meet this challenge.

I want to conclude by offering a little of my perspective. As Secretary of the Department, I am privileged to witness the hard work you do and the value you bring to this Department. But I also get to see the impression you make on the American people.

You have shown them that one person - and one Department - can make a real difference.

And that is making it a lot easier for me to convince Americans to take that one extra step - to join Citizen Corps or a CERTS team, or invest a little more on security for their small business, or report suspicious activity to the proper authorities -- or simply to log onto Ready.gov and teach their family the best way to survive an attack. And at the end of the day, that's what it's all about.

The other day I visited Boston to issue port security grants and talk about our many port security initiatives. While there I toured Boston Harbor in a new police interceptor boat we helped fund.

I was moved to learn that when the factory workers making the engine heard the boat was for homeland security, they pulled it off the line and made special improvements to it.

Everyone, it seemed, wanted to do their part to secure the homeland. They went that extra mile - because they see all of you going the extra mile, every single day.

So once again, thank you for inspiring not just vigilance, but confidence from the American people in our shared ability to meet the threat. Thank you.

This page was last modified on 06/19/03 00:00:00