

Remarks by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff at the American Legislative Exchange Council's 2005 States and National Policy Summit

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Secretary Chertoff: Thank you for that warm welcome on a snowy day. I heard those dangerous words for any speaker, which is, "speaking before breakfast is served." (Laughter.) And that's a polite way of saying be brief.

I want to thank you for the very kind introduction, Susan, and it's a pleasure to be here with members of ALEC and state legislators who, of course, are very important partners in our efforts to secure the homeland.

As state legislators, I know you understand the need for strong and effective partnerships, not only in your home districts, but across all levels of government. And we're certainly grateful for the partnership and support you've given us as you work to protect America and to build a truly national homeland security capability for our communities.

We face a lot of challenges, from natural disasters to a potential avian flu pandemic to the ongoing threat of terrorism. And as with any great set of challenges, our nation has to work together in a unified and coordinated manner across federal, state and local jurisdictions and with the private sector, and, most important, with the American people. We have to work from a set of common goals, common priorities, and build an integrated common strategy for protecting our country. That means we need to coordinate and share assets and resources and emergency plans in a way we haven't done before. And we each need to do our part to enhance emergency preparedness in our country, whether it's public officials, business leaders, or as individual citizens. These are all priorities for the Department of Homeland Security, and all areas where we depend on working very closely with the states for vital input and collaboration.

Now, since September 11th, 2001, we have made substantial progress with our state and local partners in achieving our goals. But obviously, a lot of work remains to be done. And I thought what I would take a little bit of opportunity to do this morning is talk about some of the areas where we do need to work together.

Certainly, the area of emergency preparedness. Many of our planning and response capabilities were put to an unprecedented test this year by hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma, which added up, I think, to probably the worst hurricane storm season in recorded memory. And as much as we may want to breathe a sigh of relief now that hurricane season has officially been declared over, as of the end of November, the fact of the matter is, we don't have a lot of time to quickly address some of the obvious coordination issues that arose in the initial response to these tragic catastrophes. We also have to continue to move aggressively forward, obviously, in dealing with the aftermath of these devastating storms. And, in fact, in that regard, the President asked an experienced leader, Don Powell, the Chairman of the FDIC, to work directly with state and local leaders to develop an effective long-term plan for rebuilding the Gulf Coast.

Through FEMA, we continue to provide emergency funding and housing assistance to enable victims to continue to rebuild their lives. And, of course, your support and involvement is essential to the ultimate success of these efforts.

The fact of the matter is, we have had a dispersion, or a diaspora, of people from the Gulf Coast that we haven't experienced maybe since the dust bowl of the 1930s. And that means the likelihood is that some hurricane evacuees have located in every one of your jurisdictions, and you're all dealing with the issue of helping these people to integrate into communities and go on with their lives. And that's a very big challenge, and we continue to work with you to make that transition as smooth as possible.

But even as we're doing that, as we're meeting our commitment to those victims of these hurricanes, we need to start immediately applying some of the lessons that we learned to emergency planning and response capabilities.

Fact of the matter is, looking back during Katrina, one of the most difficult aspects of initial response, which was unquestionably demanding on a scale never before seen in this country, was the inability to identify quickly where the needs were the greatest, getting supplies quickly to those areas, and obtaining accurate information about conditions on the ground. This is a responsibility, of course, that we share across the board.

Speaking on the side of the federal government, one of the first things we have to do is to re-engineer FEMA so that this agency can maximize its role supporting response and recovery efforts and providing the necessary assistance to state and local communities when those communities call on FEMA for support.

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well, what does that re-engineering mean? It means developing a more effective distribution and delivery system for supplies, more efficient business processing and disaster registration systems, and enhanced communication capabilities.

The reality is that FEMA is a 20th century organization and we are now in the 21st century. And there are processes and tools that we do see working around us in the private sector and in other areas of the government that we must adapt and apply to FEMA.

The fact of the matter is, we want to have FEMA's distribution and logistics system -- the ability to move people and goods in support of emergency responders -- emulate the best of private sector models so that we can get vital supplies and assistance to communities in a reasonable amount of time and replenish our stocks in a timely manner.

But I also have to say something else. This is, after all, a shared responsibility, and that means state and local government also has to do some significant preparedness planning to make sure, particularly in those immediate hours and first few days in the aftermath of a catastrophe, particularly an unexpected catastrophe, there are available on the state and local scene those supplies that are necessary to deal with the immediate crisis after an emergency.

This has to be a joint effort. It cannot be an effort that the federal government carries by itself, nor it is an effort that the states would want the federal government to carry by itself, because I think you rightly regard yourselves as leaders of state and local communities as wanting to have a major say in the way we respond to crises in your own communities. So that's why partnership is so very, very important here.

Another element, of course, is communications, because we can't manage and respond to a crisis if we can't talk to each other. Some of this involves upgrading equipment, satellite equipment, and interoperability. Some of it requires our ability on occasion to insert emergency reconnaissance that can go into a disaster area, particularly if state and local governments have been incapacitated, to provide everybody with reliable real-time information that can be used for informed decision-making. And we're actually beginning to stand up emergency reconnaissance teams now, consisting not only of FEMA disaster assistance specialists, but of Coast Guard personnel or Customs and Border Protection agents, Secret Service and other homeland security, law enforcement officers and assets.

And then beyond all this, beyond the array of assets and the array of capabilities is a need to actually have integrated serious, robust plans. And in order to make sure that we can carry out our part of this planning process and work with you, we have moved forward with what I announced in July, which is the standing up and filling out of a Directorate of Preparedness in the Department of Homeland Security. This Directorate of Preparedness will integrate, for the first time in this Department, planning, training, exercising and funding for prevention, protection, response and recovery as a unified whole, and make sure we're integrating all of these functions to get the best preparedness we can have.

The fiscal year 2006 budget, in fact, contains \$4 billion for this initiative, and recently the President nominated a very experienced state emergency manager and homeland security advisor from Virginia, George Foresman, to be the Undersecretary for Preparedness. We look forward to his swift confirmation. Some of you may have worked with him.

He's been a longtime advocate for the importance of preparedness and security, with decades of experience working at all levels of state and local government, and I think that will be a help as we integrate our planning together.

Another dimension of this, of course, is to make sure we are working with you to assure state and local plans are robust and effective and up to date. As you know, the President directed, when he was in New Orleans, that we work with state and local officials to review the emergency operation plans of major American urban areas to be sure those plans are clear, detailed and up to date, and we are in the process as we speak of doing that now. We've asked to have state and localities complete self-assessments by the very beginning of next year. We will review those assessments, make suggestions, and then work with state and local officials to upgrade where necessary.

These steps are just the beginning, but we can't waste any time in getting this done, because even though hurricane season is not officially on until June 1 of next year, we don't know what catastrophes lay ahead of us. As you know, we've invited state public health officials earlier this week to come talk to us about pandemic flu. We have to be prepared for all hazards, whether they be natural hazards or man-made hazards.

But there are other elements of the job of homeland security, as well, which will touch very much upon the responsibilities and the roles of state and local officials. One critical area -- and I know that this is something the President discussed when he spoke to ALEC in August -- is border security and illegal migration. The fact of the matter is, illegal migration is a severe and growing threat to our country. It undercuts the rule of law, it undermines our national security, and it imposes public safety and economic strains on our borders, states and communities.

Now, the reality is, this problem is 20 years in the making. I remember when I was a U.S. attorney in New Jersey in the early '90s going down to the border in San Diego and seeing the tremendous challenge that was faced there. And of course, we're 15 or so years later from that period of time, and we've continued to dig ourselves deeper in the hole.

It's going to take a little bit of time to dig ourselves out, but we are going to start digging ourselves out and we have started in the last few months with some very aggressive planning and approaches to the issue of how to control border migration.

The fact is, we need a comprehensive plan, and that is exactly what the President has put forward. And I'm going to talk to you about the three elements of this comprehensive plan that the President has launched to finally get control of the border and reverse this very serious issue.

First -- and not surprisingly -- we have to move to increase our ability to apprehend people who are illegally crossing the border, and then we have to detain them and remove them from the country. That means when we catch them, we can't just release them, we've got to send them back again. Our goal is to achieve such a high rate of success in apprehension and removal that we reduce illegal migration because we deter people with the understanding that they have a very low probability of success in crossing the border. That would also have a very helpful impact in reducing the power and economic strength of some of these very sophisticated illegal criminal organizations that smuggle aliens and other -- and contraband into the country.

How do we do it? Well, first we need to put enough boots on the ground and give our Border Patrol agents the tools and technology to carry out their difficult and dangerous work. Since taking office, the President has directed an increase in funding for border security of 60 percent, and added resources to hire an additional 1,900 Border Patrol agents. But to further strengthen our ability to control the border, in October the President signed an appropriation that authorized an additional 1,000 agents, and 2,000 additional detention beds, which will allow us to apprehend and detain more people.

The fact of the matter is, we are committed this fiscal year to an ambitious goal, which is to end the "catch and release" policy at the border and make it "catch and remove." And in order to do that, we will be actually deploying 1,700 Border Patrol agents along the southern border during this coming fiscal year, as well as additional beds and additional tools that we will use to make the process of removing people from the United States back to their native countries more efficient and quicker. And that means a whole menu of things, from trying to make the legal process more efficient and less bureaucratic, to cutting the time it takes to process people and send them back, to working with some foreign countries that have been a little bit, shall we say reluctant, to take some of their illegal migrants back. And we're going to press them to live up to their responsibility to make sure that when we catch illegal migrants, we're going to send them back home again.

A second element of this comprehensive border strategy is a robust interior enforcement program. People should understand that there are consequences to being in this country illegally, and employers should understand there are consequences to knowingly hiring illegal aliens.

Now, we have to be fair to employers. We have to provide them with the tools to verify the status of employees and to detect fraudulent documents. But when we do that, through more rigorous interior enforcement, we have to hold employers accountable for non-compliance. And we're doing that by devoting more personnel and specialized teams to locating fugitives, to enforcing worksite rules, to chasing after criminal aliens, and breaking apart smuggling and human trafficking organizations.

But all that is on the enforcement side -- enforcement at the border and enforcement at the interior. We have to be practical and understand the huge impact on illegal migration that follows from the economics of illegal migration, the strong economic demand that draws hundreds of thousands of migrants from all over the world to come into the United States to perform jobs that employers cannot find Americans to perform.

And that brings us to the President's proposal for a temporary worker program. As I've said when I testified before Congress, we are not, and we really cannot in any practical sense, build a great wall along our borders. We do have to address the economic engine that is such a powerful lure and that makes it so difficult for us to keep that incredible pressure, hydraulic pressure of illegal migrants coming into the country.

The fact of the matter is many, many of those who come into this country are looking for work. And if we don't find a way to channel them into a legal regulated and temporary way to do work and then go home again, we will continue to be fighting against this incredible economic tide. We owe it to our Border Patrol agents and our enforcement people and those who man watch at the border to give them a powerful tool, which is a way to channel a lot of that economic pressure into a regulated temporary program so they can focus their efforts on keeping out people who want to come in to really do harm to this country.

The analogy I use sometimes is like trying to dam a river. If all you do is build a dam and try to stop the river, it rises higher and higher, you've got to keep building, you've got to keep strengthening. When you build a dam in an intelligent way, you've channeled the water in a productive fashion, and that relieves pressure on the dam. That's how we build our great dams. Well, this is an economic pressure that is comparable to the kind of hydraulic pressure we're talking about when we build a dam.

A comprehensive approach that includes border enforcement, interior enforcement, and a temporary worker program I think gives us real promise for the first time in reversing what has been an intractable problem for decades in this country. And that means we're going to be able to focus ourselves on the real threats to homeland security -- terrorists, criminals, traffickers in illegal drugs and other contraband.

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I understand securing our borders is not going to happen overnight, just like preparedness is not going to happen overnight. But that's no excuse not to begin moving vigorously in the direction of accomplishing our goals. As with other challenges facing our country, we can develop an effective and measured approach to these very critical tasks that is consistent with our freedoms and way of life, but that is also effective. To do that, our state leaders are a vital part of the process. There's no substitute for your experience and knowledge and your willingness to help us meet that shared responsibility. You are our partners in this endeavor. We look forward to working with you in the weeks and months ahead as we protect our country and address some of these many challenges.

I want to commend you for coming here to share your expertise and your experience with each other. We look forward to continuing to work with you. And I wish you success with this conference.

Thank you very much.