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Remarks by Governor Tom Ridge, Homeland Security - Designate in a Town Hall Meeting for Future Employees of the Department of Homeland Security

Ronald Reagan Building
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2:05 P.M. EST

MR. SESNO: (Welcoming remarks.)

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Thanks very much for accepting our invitation to host what I consider to be one of the most important events that I will undertake as -- hopefully -- an appointed Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security: and that is beginning the conversation with the men and women with whom I'll be working, men and women who will be getting up every morning, as I do, to go to work, whose mission will be to protect America -- protect their citizens, protect their neighborhoods, to protect our way of life. And so I want to thank you for accepting our invitation to join us this afternoon.

I know there's a lot of anxiety. I suspect there's an enormous amount of uncertainty. Hopefully, there's a little bit of excitement because we have the opportunity to do something that happens in this town every 50 or 60 years, and that's create a new department. And in this instance, perhaps, to create a legacy and preserve and protect a way of life that is unique to each and every one of us, that is so important to every one of us.

And I know that there are a lot of questions you're going to ask this afternoon. And hopefully, we can answer most. But I wanted to assure you that this is just the beginning of the dialogue that we have to have. Because at the end of the day, in order for us to fulfill our mission to protect America and our way of life, we have to fulfill that mission together. And we have to respond to the challenges together.

Now, in my 20 years of public service as a congressman and as a governor, and most recently in the job I presently hold as an assistant to the President, I have been privileged to actually see how you and your colleagues work and to see how well you work. Most recently I saw, not only Customs at the Ambassador Bridge in Detroit. But I saw how hard and how well you were working on the Cargo Security Initiative in Rotterdam. It's something we need to do. You're going to do it and you're going to do it very, very well.

I see INS down at El Paso working side by side with their colleagues in Customs. And you've got an enormous task ahead of you because we have to design the entry-exit system for this country so that we remain an open and welcoming and trusting country, we do a better job of identifying those who visit, identify why they are visiting and making sure when that opportunity to visit has expired, that they leave as promised. Huge undertaking. And I know you're up to it.

I've had the pleasure, way back when, in the '80s as congressman, to put my fingerprints and work on the Stafford Act that directs the good folks over at the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and have had the privilege to watch my great friend Joe Allbaugh and his extraordinary team respond to the tragedy and the horror of September 11th, 2001.

I travel commercially. I fly from time to time. And I've seen the great work that the Transportation Department and the Transportation Security Administration under Admiral Loy have done, getting people through those gates with the professionalism they demonstrated over the Thanksgiving holiday. There were a lot of people that said that couldn't be done within a year; you couldn't ramp up and find 40,000 or 45,000 people and get them in place, and bring the professionalism and the training to that enterprise.

So I've seen that and I've benefitted by the work at so many of the other agencies that will be pooled in and other units that will be pooled in from Commerce and Agriculture and Justice. So I know what you do, and I know how well you do it. And I really believe that all of us, in one department, finally a department whose primary mission is to protect our fellow citizens and our way of life, will have an opportunity to do it even better.

So this is a special time. It's an historic time. I believe we are up to the task, and I'm grateful to have the opportunity this afternoon to spend a little time with you and will certainly look forward in the weeks and months and years ahead to take on the mission side by side with each and every one of you.

Thank you. (Applause.)

MR. SESNO: Well, Governor Ridge, as I listen to you, and as I think about people sitting at home, whether they're federal employees or not, it seems to me that this would be one of those appropriate places that, as you could see by the roadside, you know, your tax dollars at work.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Works well.

MR. SESNO: You're creating a large, new, cobbled-together department to respond to issues of homeland security.

So, the question, really -- and maybe this is more for the general public than for the crowd here, at least to begin with -- as a practical matter, how will this make America safer?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Let me count the ways. We will get people and cargo across our borders quicker, we will need and help drive some of the technological innovation that will make us safer, we will have the opportunity to not only fuse and analyze, but share information with law enforcement and first responders in an unprecedented way. We will truly have the opportunity to engage our partners at the state and local level. People will see that.

This unit, this department, will work with the private sector to identify vulnerabilities. Because one of the challenges we have in this country is that the terrorists don't have to bring weapons. They can take advantage of the diversity that we have in this country, the strong economic diversity we have and find both weapons and targets out there. And we will be working with the private sector and we'll see on a daily basis the interaction of this department with men and women in workplaces around the country.

So whether you're working with the private sector, whether we're working at the borders, whether we're monitoring those who come into this country more effectively, whether we're improving our security at the airports, and the list goes on and on, every single day there will be a way that we manifest that by working together we do a better job of protecting America.

MR. SESNO: It really is a merger -- 22 departments and agencies coming together. So as a practical matter, again, what starts happening on March 1st, when you start setting up shop? How quickly is this merger going to come together?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Well, on March 1st, just about all of the departments and agencies move into the Department of Homeland Security. Shortly thereafter, we will begin the process of trying to rationalize and take 22 different management systems and personnel systems into one.

But on March 1st, by and large, every man and women in this office and 170,000 plus employees around this country will go to work doing the same thing they're doing now. But in time, we hope that we can empower them and enable them, through a variety of different means, to do an even better job than they're doing now. And I believe that's going to happen.

MR. SESNO: Also, as within any merger -- and I've heard stories from inside some offices in what will be DHS -- there's something of analysis paralysis that takes place as a merger looms. People start wondering where they're going to go to work, who is going to be their boss, what's going to happen to their boss, will they survive or not.

How do you counter analysis paralysis, and is it getting in the way of homeland security in the meantime?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: These men and women have been going to work, protecting the homeland before September 11th, 2001. They've been doing their job on a regular basis before we decided that we could do an even better job by merging these departments.

And all we ask of them is, continue to do that job as well as they've been doing it, and it's up to us to empower them in other ways to enable them to do an even better job. There will be some changes, clearly. But changes bring opportunities. And in my sense, in my judgement, that we have opportunities to work more closely together than we ever have before, we have an opportunity to get -- put together a contemporary personnel system that gives us the kind of merit-based, fairness-based program that we want to govern all 22 presently different departments and agencies.

We obviously have to create a personnel system around which the interaction between all of us is solid -- it's positive. So I'm very optimistic about our ability to work with the new units as we bring them together to create one agency for the first time ever whose primary mission -- you and I are going to talk probably a little bit about some of the other historical missions, and we've got to stay focused on that. But our primary mission every morning when we wake up to go to work is to protect America.

MR. SESNO: So this is not -- this department is fundamentally different from other departments?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: I think -- I know my colleagues in public service that are here with us this afternoon and are listening to the broadcast appreciate and admire what their other colleagues do throughout all levels of government. But this is the first time, because of the unique nature of the new enemy that we confront, where we've asked public servants on our own soil, outside the Department of Defense, to work together to defend America and protect our way of life.

MR. SESNO: Of course, there has been some suggestion and some discussion about the whole question of unions and collective bargaining and civil service and protections. Is there a reason that this department is or should be different from any other place in government?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: First of all, we don't envision any changes. If you're in a collective bargaining unit now, you're moving into a collective bargaining unit when you transfer into the new department. We tried to underscore publicly -- and this gives me an opportunity to say it again with a larger audience -- that all the civil service protections that are very appropriately associated with the men and women who wear the public service uniform, the Fair Labor Standards Act and the Hatch Act and the whistleblower protection and a variety of these other protections, they move right along in the department.

It would be our job to make sure that they understand those protections exist, because they need them, they deserve them, and they'll continue to be a part of the employment infrastructure of the new department.

MR. SESNO: Many of the aspects of the new department come with tasks. And many Americans -- I'm sure they realize it, but they may not realize the degree of it -- tasks that do not necessarily relate directly to homeland security. FEMA, for example, where you had, I think, 89 major natural disasters from -- what is it, from January 2001 to December of this year. That's hurricanes, floods, tornadoes --

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Right.

MR. SESNO: FEMA -- or what will be FEMA will be part of Homeland Security. Customs and other organizations, agencies, are also doing things that do not relate directly to homeland security. How do you prevent those other tasks from being lost or sublimated to the larger priority of homeland security?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: I think we begin with the notion that the historic mission that these agencies have been on remains an integral part of how they do business each and every day. Clearly, we've got Customs that does a variety of different things in support of this country -- been doing it for 200 plus year. You want a great lecture on that, get Rob Bonner. He'll tell you all about what Customs does.

But the fact of the matter is, in the process of doing the things that they normally do at our borders, for example, with additional support from us, be it in terms of personnel or technology, as they work more closely with the successor to INS focusing in on people and cargo, they'll be able to do an even better job of protecting America.

Joe Allbaugh in FEMA -- clearly, that mission has changed over the past 20 years. At one time, 20 plus years ago, it was really

-- in the middle of the Cold War, a defensive mechanism. What happens if there's a strike on this country? Then it evolved into a response agency in natural disasters. They continue to do that. But the skills and the training and the services they provide in response to a natural disaster -- very similar to the skills, training, and response we want them to provide after a terrorist event.

And if you talk to the people in New York and you talk to the people here in the Washington, D.C. area, I think they would say that FEMA's response after that terrorist event was professional. It was compassionate. And it made a difference in their lives. All across the board.

So you've got the Coast Guard. They do fisheries and they rescue and they protect our borders. But we've got to have them focus on ports. And they've been doing that now; but, again, with some assistance from the new department, they

can do an even better job.

So I guess I would say to each and every one of you, if your responsibilities in this particular department or agency are not directed toward homeland security, what you're doing -- some way, some manner, shape or form -- will be a part of the system we have to protect this country. And again, we think bringing these people together, they'll do an even better job. And they do a good job right now.

I mean, the best asset we have in this new department will not be the money, will not be the technology, will be the men and women who have been going to work every day trying to help their fellow countrymen. And we'll just build on that. And we think we can make even greater strides and provide even greater and deeper protection for the department.

MR. SESNO: When will people who are being pulled into this Department of Homeland Security know if they're changing their place of work, know if their supervisor is changing? Or very basic questions that you need to know --

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Fair question.

MR. SESNO -- to show up and go to work and do your best every day.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Well, the fair question is that presently, we have not even begun -- we haven't really moved down that path very far. We're trying to assemble and are in the process of assembling a solid management team. I think everyone understands that for a year after their unit or department moves into the Department of Homeland Security, everything about them remains the same -- their pay, benefits. There is this great concern that there will be this massive dislocation of people. But by and large, people at the borders will stay at the borders. People at the ports are going to stay at the ports.

I mean, there's not going to be this -- well, there's anxiety about this huge dislocation. Clearly, we change -- there may also come some career opportunities that heretofore didn't exist. But by and large, we want people to be -- remain at their station. We're just going to give them a little bit more help in the process.

MR. SESNO: I want to start getting ready to turn to you for some of your questions out in the audience now. As I said, we have four microphones. For those of you who would be brave enough to start, please raise your hand. We'll get a microphone moving toward you. And I'm sure we've got many volunteers.

But while you do that -- and please raise your hand as I turn to the Governor with the next question. It's not just the merger of these 22 departments and agencies; it's also working much more closely with state and local authorities. Now, how does the fundamental relationship to knit together Homeland Security unfold over the coming months?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: When the President created the Office for Homeland Security, he talked about the development of a national strategy to secure the homeland. One of the reasons we recommended to the President that we create this department and bring these people and their experiences together was we felt it was the best way to build and then sustain, permanently, relationships with state government, with local government, with the private sector and, for that matter, down the road with individual citizens.

And, again, the notion being that as well-intentioned as we are in Washington -- and we're going to have funding and resources from Washington and leadership from Washington, we'll set standards from Washington -- but we need to engage America, all of America, all levels of government -- the private sector, the academic sector, and even individual citizens, to resist and confront this new threat.

One of the best ways to do that is bringing these agencies together, and then as we reorganize these agencies, go do it in a way that facilitates the creation as well as our ability to sustain those relationships permanently. It's an enduring vulnerability.

MR. SESNO: Sure.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: We accept it as a permanent condition of life, so we have to make permanent changes in order to deal with it.

MR. SESNO: Right. Because you need to hear from some sheriff out there or someone who knows of the security of a rail yard.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Well, we love those sheriffs out there. I mean, those sheriffs and that law enforcement community out there, they're about 650,000 to 700,000 strong. One of these days in the very distant future, in our

infrastructure analysis -- information analysis and infrastructure unit, first of all, we become a customer of the CIA. We become a customer of the FBI. We get their reports. We generate our own internally. And working with the FBI, we want to engage state and local law enforcement. It's a great force multiplier. So that sheriff, that local constable, that state policeman down the road, we'll pull them in.

MR. SESNO: All right, let's turn to our first question from the audience. We'll come back to law enforcement, I hope, in a few minutes.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Okay.

MR. SESNO: Go ahead, if you would introduce yourself and tell us your department or your agency.

Q TSA. Sir, we have the homeland to secure and take care of. But there's large impacts and relationships across the borders and international standards and rules. How do we play in that? How do we deal with the policy of foreign interaction?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Well, your question with regard to the connection between the department and the international world is a very important one and a critical piece of the new department. We've already seen that there are several agencies who are moving into the new department who have begun to take a leadership role in that effort because the reach of these terrorists is global. We may be the primary target -- we are the primary target, make no mistake about it. But their reach and their impact has been global. It's a French tanker off of Yemen. It's vacationers from many countries in Bali. And the list goes on and on.

So we need -- if we are to worry about commercial aviation and set security standards -- to engage the community around the world. Again, it's something that -- FEMA has a representative that I spent some time with at the European Union in terms of coordinating preparedness and response. This cargo security initiative that Rob Bonner and his team came up with is an immediate response to the vulnerability we have at our ports, because we get about 6 million containers at our ports from around the world every year. About two-thirds of those come from about 20 ports.

Now, Rob and his team didn't wait for the new department. They went out, and Customs created a cargo security initiative. And we're going to put non-intrusive technology and some of Customs' best people in 20 of these ports so we can do the inspections before those containers even get on the ship. So whether it's shipping, commercial aviation, preparedness and response, best practices, information sharing, intelligence gathering, there's a huge, huge international dimension to this effort.

MR. SESNO: We have another question. The gentleman in the back.

Q GSA, Federal Protective Service.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Yes, sir.

Q Sir, in our shop there has been discussions about job security and with the amount of people and the amount of agents and things. Because we are a small agency -- we weren't even mentioned today, the Federal Protective Service -- whether or not we will maintain our jobs and continue to do -- I heard you say we will be doing the things we were doing. But with all these other agents coming into Homeland Security, will we still be able to complete our mission, as we do right now?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Yes, sir. You have a unique and specific mission. I didn't list all 22 departments or agencies and I apologize for excluding yours. You've got a unique and important mission and we're proud to have you.

And it's just -- there will be, I think, as we design the new personnel system that over-arches all the 22 departments and agencies in here, I think, we hope to design it in a way that we can recognize performance. We can actually enhance our recruiting efforts.

And obviously one of the areas that we want to focus on down the road is to take a look at the equipment and the training and the technology that we give to people who we've asked and we've empowered with these critical responsibilities. So we're glad to have you as part of the team and look forward to working with you again as part of that team.

MR. SESNO: Governor, before I take the next question, let me follow on the gentleman's question, if I may, for just a moment with something I heard you say before when you were talking about certain things. You said, nothing will change for a year.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Yes.

MR. SESNO: What happens after a year?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Yes. Well, that is the time that we hope -- first of all, Congress and the President and everybody has recognized that the most important asset in this entire effort are the men and women who work there.

In order to provide some stability, in order to hopefully alleviate, not eliminate, some of the anxiety, the Congress said, from a year after your unit moves into the new department, there is no change. Your job is secure, your pay is secure, your benefits are secure.

And then it's our responsibility to sit down with those who represent the unionized work force and the non-unionized work force to work out a personnel system. But we thought it was very, very important to try to reduce as much concern and anxiety as possible to say, this is going to take a while to do, we want to do it right, and so let's tell everybody: your job is secure, your pay is secure, your benefits are secure until we meet with your representatives and try to work out, we think, a contemporary system that will be much better than the existing one.

MR. SESNO: A question over here.

Q Good afternoon, Governor.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Yes, sir.

Q I'm from the Department of Justice. A question about personnel. From what I understand, right now I am in the competitive civil service with 29 years service, and I can apply for vacancies in the competitive civil service. But when I am moved into the Department of Homeland Security, I will be thrown out of the competitive civil service and put into the accepted service.

And as a member of the accepted service, I will no longer be allowed to apply for vacancies in the competitive civil service. Is this correct?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: That sounds the way it existed under the old system. Hopefully, by the time we configure the new system, you may have the kind of options that we would like to create within the department for professional promotion and advancement.

I cannot answer specifically that question, but I've got your name and I'm going to get back to you with a specific answer. You might want to check it on the website. It's www.dhs.gov. That's one of the ways we're going to try and stay in touch with you over the next couple of weeks. I think after the first of the year, we're going to put in an 800-number that you can call.

We're going to start getting a newsletter out to you from time to time to answer fundamental questions like that. It's a legitimate concern someone with all your experience to have. You deserve the answer. We'll find ways to get it to you. All right?

MR. SESNO: Other question right in front of us here. Sir?

Q TSA. I'm interested in the Homeland Security Advanced Research Projects Agency that the law instituted.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Yes.

Q But as far as I can tell, there's no one there yet. So how can we avail ourselves of opportunities such as that?

MR. SESNO: And, Governor, perhaps you would explain briefly what that is --

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Yes, right, right --

MR. SESNO: -- for people who are watching and may not be familiar with that.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: One of the units that the President proposed and the Congress really enthusiastically embraced within the new department is a unit that will deal with the science and technology that we think we need to deploy in this country to help us combat terrorism, the technology of detection. It goes across the board. There are literally hundreds, if not thousands of companies, that have already seen an area where they believe technology can enhance our ability

to protect ourselves.

This unit will not only give strategic focus -- be used to give strategic focus to the hundreds of millions of dollars that are spent in other agencies on technology for security purposes, but this unit will also have some of its own money to work with the academic research community, the private sector.

As we assess needs in our country, based on the intelligence we receive, we will have the capacity to direct dollars for a technological application we believe will help us either prevent the attack, reduce our vulnerability to the attack, or give us the capacity to respond even more quickly to an event.

So we're in the process of setting up a personnel system. We're obviously going to need some people within the department to help provide that strategic focus. And that information will also be provided to you down the road if that's a career path you're interested in following.

MR. SESNO: Okay. Other question, in the back, sir.

Q Good afternoon, sir. I'm with the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The question I have is if you can give us an update on the location of the new department? (Laughter.)

GOVERNOR RIDGE: I was going to ask you that question.

MR. SESNO: And I'll have a follow-up.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Well, good, good. Well, maybe you know. Here's what I know that a couple of days ago the requirements for a headquarters building went out. And I believe that there was a very short time frame, five to seven days, for people to get back with us, who have taken a look at the requirements. There's absolutely no decision that's been made as to its location. Obviously, it's going to be within the community -- D.C., Maryland, Virginia. That's all I can tell you.

We obviously are not going to have a headquarters -- and this may be comforting to you and depending on the kind of environment you work in, maybe you'll be disappointed. But you've got 15,000 to 17,000 men and women working in the new department as of March 1st here. This new headquarters is not going to accommodate 15,000-plus people. But as soon as we know, we'll let you know.

MR. SESNO: That leads to another question, if I may, and that is, for people who are working in departments, agencies that become part of DHS in Colorado or in Virginia or in Texas or wherever, will they still be working where they are now?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Most of them will remain where they are. Depending on how we restructure some of those offices, again, there may be some change -- no, there will be change. I mean, change is inevitable. So I don't want to suggest to you that there will not be some changes out there. But, again, by and large, most of the people we have at critical venues -- airports, land ports, seaports -- most of them will remain pretty close to where they are.

MR. SESNO: Sir?

Q Yes, sir, United States Customs.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Yes, sir.

Q I had a question. I know that it costs a lot to maintain our borders, to protect our borders. Is there going to be more allocations of money towards protection of our borders, helping us to do our job? Even if it means overtime? (Laughter.)

GOVERNOR RIDGE: I tell you what, that's the best response any question has received all day. (Applause.)

We are working on budget issues right now. As you know, the President in last year's budget asked for additional dollars for Customs and INS, for people and for payroll. Number one, we're hoping that when the Congress gets back, they can finish the appropriation cycle from last year's budget before getting to this year's budget.

We know we need to do more at the borders. A lot of people focus in on more bodies and more people. And, clearly, in the immediate response to 9/11 we were able to put in place hundreds, if not thousands, of National Guard personnel around the country. But I think one of the applications for some of the technology that has been used in the foreign war

on terrorism may have -- does definitely have application on the borders as well.

So it will be people, technology -- and if you're working overtime, doggone it, you deserve to be paid for it. So that's just the way it ought to be, all right? (Laughter.)

MR. SESNO: Sir.

Q National Communications System. Over the past 15 months, the Office of Cyber Security and your Office of Homeland Security have done

some exceptional focus on issues and a lot of excellent work. Will those offices continue, or will they be merged into the new department?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: The Office of Homeland Security, as the President indicated during the -- our discussion on the Hill with regard to the creation of the new department, will remain in the White House. And how it relates to either the existing Office of Cyber Security, I really can't answer that question. I do not know.

I thank you for giving the kind of public tribute you did to Dick Clark and his Cyber Security folks and others. When people think of critical infrastructure, they have a tendency to think of bricks and mortar. But given the interdependency of just about every physical piece of critical infrastructure, energy, telecommunications, financial institutions and the like with the Internet and the cyber side of their business, we need to be focused on both, and will be.

But how those two will relate after the new department is hooked up, I cannot tell you. I don't know at this point.

MR. SESNO: Governor, I'm doing some work with George Mason University's critical infrastructure project, and 85 percent of the critical infrastructure of which you speak is owned by the private sector. How is this new department going to work in different ways, once you pull it together, with the private sector, whether it's a chemical plant someplace or an Internet service provider?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: We are close to completing a strategy to deal with -- well, strategy doesn't mean much to folks, so let me just distill it. We've got a way forward so that we can work with the private sector to assess how they're vulnerable, to share best practices, to reduce their vulnerability. And it will be one of the primary functions of this new department because we're going to get a lot of information in, a lot of threat information. We're going to have analysts working -- not only in Washington -- but elsewhere, whose responsibility will be to work with the private sector to shore up those vulnerabilities.

The notion behind the President's initiative -- the notion behind the President's initiative was, first of all we got to map the vulnerabilities in this country. And one of the provisions in the new -- the legislation that created the department was a freedom of information exemption. So that when we're working with the private sector and we're asking them -- and they work very closely with us -- but we need to know where you view yourselves as most vulnerable. That's not exactly information we want to share with the rest of the world. So we have that Freedom of Information Act exemption.

We need to do a national overview of our infrastructure, map vulnerabilities, then set priorities, and then work with the private sector to reduce the vulnerabilities based on our priorities. One of the challenges that I think we have -- if you don't mind, Frank, let me just digress here, just a for a minute -- all of us, and we have to fulfill our mission together, all of us -- there is no conceivable way that this country can harden every target, do everything humanly and technologically possible with regard to every person that comes across the border, every piece of cargo that comes across the border, every potential vulnerability in the private sector or the public sector. We can't possibly do that.

We're too open. We're too diverse. We're too large. It cannot be done. So the approach that we have to take -- all of us -- is manage the risk. Manage the risk based on vulnerabilities and consequence, manage the risk based on threat information that we receive -- either generated within this country or other sources that we have around the world. There will be a lot of very difficult and challenging decisions that we're going to have to make in this new department. But we have to manage the risk. And we'll do that using your judgment, using the best scientific analysis that we can get. We'll use it doing modeling.

One of the pieces of the new department provides for us to be able to set up some modeling at national labs or academic labs so we can make different assessments about different kinds of vulnerabilities and different kinds of consequences if one of those vulnerabilities is hit. So, again, we're going to manage the risk. We can do it. But I think we just have to remind ourselves that we are a large, open, diverse, trusting country, and we shouldn't kid ourselves as to our capacity of being able to be immune forever from everything. I think we all understand that.

One thing we do know about how the terrorists act, though, you start moving to protect a particular sector or building or target, they'll pull back. And we're going to have to start thinking internally like terrorists from time to time. But around this whole enterprise is the notion of all of us working together to manage the risk.

Q I'm a long-time employee for the U.S. Coast Guard. I'm under the old CSRS retirement system, and a lot of us are worried that we're going to get forced out before we're ready to retire or that you're going to change the retirement system on us.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: We don't want to force you out; we like experience and we're not going to change the retirement system.

MR. SESNO: Period?

Q Thank you. (Applause.)

MR. SESNO: There we go. Yes, ma'am.

Q I'm USDA. Governor, you're bringing together personnel with regulatory cultures, law enforcement culture and military. I'd like to know if you could share with us what is your vision for the culture in DHS and how we would get there?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: There are probably differences we can point to in culture and history of the organizations that you're talking about. But there's one great unifying theme, and that is that we are together in these -- we are together in this enterprise to protect America.

We know that if we -- we've done a pretty good job working separately protecting America. I think I can convince you we can do an even better job working together to protect America. We will be united around a common purpose and a common mission. And we want to do everything we can to respect the history of some of these organizations and their historic missions.

But the unifying element through this enterprise is we're going to wake up every single day going to do whatever we're asked to do in our individual jobs as best we possibly can because we can't afford any gaps in the system, that's where terrorists get through. And we're unified around the notion and the culture of protecting our friends and neighbors and our way of life.

I mean, I think that gets us there. I mean, you have been doing it instinctively. You haven't really thought about being part of a homeland security team until people, such as yours truly, recommended to the President we need a department to bring everybody together to be part of a homeland security enterprise.

I'm sure that those good people working in INS offices day after day after day, they're doing a good job, they're trying to monitor people coming in, monitor their conduct while they're here, seeing if they leave town. But you never thought of yourself as part of a homeland security operation. Certainly, the people at FEMA running out, trying to respond to tornadoes and hurricanes and the like, never saw themselves as part, necessarily, of a homeland security operation to defeat terrorists.

You know, I think the folks at the borders over the years have had an inkling that not only dealing with drugs and illegal -- other illegal contraband and illegal immigration, but there might be some terrorist that might filter through. But nobody, really, I think, on a day to day basis said, I'm wearing a uniform of public service. It's not the Department of Defense, but my mission is to help secure my country in my country. That's pretty heady stuff.

So it's not just about building a new department, it's about taking on this mission. And we calculated, I think, if you take a look at the number of people that come across the borders, cargos into the ports, ships into the ports, planes that land, there's an excess of a billion transactions that all of us have to monitor and watch annually. Think about that: a billion-plus, and we've got to be right every day. I think there is no greater unifying element that we are working together, we can fulfill this mission. (Applause.)

Q Good afternoon, sir. I'm from the Air and Marine Interdiction Division, U.S. Customs Service. Given how critically important the Department of Defense is to our national counterterrorism effort, has your policy team had time to think about the line that needs to be drawn between the military and domestic law enforcement agencies when jointly conducting security operations in the homeland?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: We have been doing more than thinking about it. We've begun discussions with our colleagues

at the Department of Defense, because Secretary Rumsfeld, as you know, has created a northern command in the Department of Defense. And this gives us an opportunity because there is a focal point through the civilian chain of command where, Secretary to Secretary and our designees can sit down and work out in advance when we would need and when we could access the very unique capabilities that the Department of Defense would provide for us in either preventing or responding to an attack.

So what has happened, as we're creating this new department, the Secretary of Defense created a new command obviously dealing with Mexico and Canada as well. But because of the new structure over there, we have a single point of access -- again, not directly from me to the General, but from Secretary to Secretary and our designees to work out these very important questions that you raise.

We've got special assets. We want to be able to say in advance if such and such occurrence occurs, these things will follow. And rarely, but we know we mean to use them and we'd like to plan them in advance.

MR. SESNO: Let me follow that with something that's separate but related in a sense. And that is the whole question of intelligence-gathering information analysis.

You'll get information -- you'll get information from the likes of the CIA and the FBI, as you said. But you will also collect it through Customs, GSA conceivably, you name it. How is that going to be fashioned? Will this department set the priorities from the analysis of that information, or as some are suggesting, does that need to be done by an altogether different entity, still to be created?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: One of the features of the new department and one of the basic units -- and I referred to it earlier -- was the unit we call Information Analysis and Infrastructure Protection. This department, as I said before, will get the reports and the analysis from the CIA and the FBI. I can speak from personal experience that we will institutionalize it. If we have to go back to the CIA or to the FBI for additional information, we will get it. We meet every single day with the President of the United States, and I am personal witness to the collaboration not just between the FBI and the CIA, but there have been occasions when we received information, we needed greater detail about the information, we went back to either agency and we received it.

You add to that the information that is collected by and among the units that are coming into the new department. Customs collects information, INS collects information, Coast Guard collects information, TSA gets information, other entities get information that all come into that unit.

So we will actually be in a position from time to time to share, particularly with the FBI, some information that we had acquired and analyzed and ship it over for them, as they deal with the disruption of terrorist activity in this country. So we will have access to all the intelligence, all the information that relates to homeland security, domestic security, and then our primary responsibility is to take that and shore up or harden America. The primary responsibility of the FBI is to take all that information and go out and disrupt those who would -- those individuals who would be responsible for terrorist activity.

MR. SESNO: If your department says we need more of that information, they will do it?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Yes. I mean, that -- again, that has been my experience to date, and on a personal level I think all of us are working together to make sure that it is an institutionalized within the framework of the a department. But, in fact, Congress placed in the language of the new bill, an affirmative obligation on those entities to share that information with us. But I want to divide.

The dividing line is that, they will share with us -- we're going to have an intelligence product that we're going to share with others, as well. Our use of this information is to go out and work with law enforcement and the private sector to make sure that if there's a threat and there's a vulnerability, we're prepared to respond to that vulnerability and maybe harden that target.

The FBI's responsibility in this is to go disrupt the actors, go out there and get those potential terrorists before they strike us.

MR. SESNO: Would you like to have a domestic intelligence function centralized?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: I think -- right now, it's centralized every day within the President's -- within the Oval Office. The President feels very, very strongly that -- and I think it's appropriate -- that when you have an intelligence-gathering, foreign intelligence-gathering entity, that person shouldn't be reporting to a Secretary of the Cabinet. That person should be reporting directly to the President of the United States.

Bob Mueller, under the FBI, at the direction of the President, has shifted. Again, they've had an historic mission. But like we're asking other agencies to do, shift resources and personnel into another mission and that is intelligence-gathering and disruption activity of these potential terrorists.

I think between or among the different responsibilities assigned to the different agencies, for the time being I'm quite satisfied with the arrangement because I know that as far as we are concerned in our department we will get the information we need from the relevant agencies.

Q I'm from the Immigration Service.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Yes, ma'am.

Q I think the DHS provides an opportunity for us to do our mission much more effectively. And my question is, is there a means or a way for agency employees to present ideas for change and improvement to DHS and the people who will be involved in handling the reorganization? Thank you.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Absolutely. One of the things I've discovered in public service, but also interacting with the private sector and others, is when you ask the men and women who are involved -- whether it's in government or in a factory or elsewhere, how they might be able to do more or better with the resources they have, or what recommendations they might have so that they can do a better job -- because people go to work every day, you want to go a good job.

Everybody goes to work trying to do a good job. I believe that. I believe everybody here, when you go into that office, wherever you go, you say, I'm going to do as best I can -- myself, my country, and my job and today. That's the mind set that you bring in. Along the way, you say to yourself, gee, I wish the superintendent or so and so would rethink about how we get this information, or rethink about this process, or how we do that.

I'll give you perfect example, when I was Governor of Pennsylvania, I went into the J. Edgar Thompson works -- steel mill in Pennsylvania. And in Pennsylvania, the labor and management in steel mills didn't always get along. The fact of the matter is, management sat down with these individuals and they changed a lot of the process on the floor, increased safety, improved productivity, enhanced profitability, didn't cost anybody a dime. They just listened to the employees.

We know that you bring a lot of experience and a lot of ideas to what you do when you go into that office every day trying to do a good job. Part of our job is, like I said, we're in this mission together. We will only fulfill this mission if we work closely together and listen to one another. That doesn't mean we're going to accept every recommendation. But I tell you, we are all ears.

INS -- you've got a real tough job. A very important job. And as you know, the legislation really takes INS -- it terminates the agency, as it presently exists, on January 24th. You're divided into three sections, the judicial, review, stays of justice. And there's a citizenship and immigration bureau, and then there's an enforcement bureau.

As we go about creating this new 21st century department, it will be very important for us to hear how you think you can do your job better. And I am sure you have the opportunity to do that.

MR. SESNO: We're going to take one more question from the floor. Sir.

Q Hello, Governor. I'm with the U.S. Customs Service. My question relates to how you plan to ramp-up the department headquarters. I know sitting where we sit, it's -- I think most of us are eager to, number one, find out what's going to happen. But, number two, to continue to move. And we'd like to have counterparts to work with up at the department level.

Obviously, some of the people over in your Office of Homeland Security have been trying to fulfill those roles, and there's a transition team.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Right.

Q But the department, itself, has got to obviously have a headquarters. Do you have a schedule for that?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: ASAP, I guess, is the schedule. (Laughter.) We'd like to -- we'd like to be able to identify that as quickly as possible and begin the transition, but I can't give you a time certain. All I know is that we've put out -- I want to assure you that the beautiful offices that the Customs have are off limits. (Laughter.) Nice offices you've got here,

Rob. That's okay, we're not going to touch them.

But we're going to try to move as quickly as possible. But I can't tell you when. I don't think it's going to be by the end of January. I would be very surprised -- hopefully by March 1st we'll have identified a place that the headquarters team can move into.

MR. SESNO: Governor, before we wrap and before I ask you if you have any final questions, I'd like to bring this conversation back down to earth in a sense, and to a very basic question. I don't know how much detail you'll be able to go into. But how would you characterize right now, today, the nature of the threat, the terrorist threat, confronting this country?

GOVERNOR RIDGE: We have the national threat system that has us at an elevated level of alert, which is a pretty significant level. And it's based upon the operations that we have seen conducted around the world. It will be the responsibility of the new department and the new Secretary to reassess that level of threat every single day.

We know -- ladies and gentlemen, we're dealing with an enemy without uniforms, that's not centrally located, that doesn't distinguish between civilians and combatants, and it sees the United States as its primary battleground. So it's a serious level, it's an elevated level.

And that is why we've asked, and the federal government has done it, but that is why we've asked states and companies, as we adjust to the new threat environment and as we tell you that the level of threat remains high, we see operations around the rest of the world -- we could only conclude that -- and we know there are people who are sympathetic or supportive or actually even potentially terrorists within this country, so we have an elevated level of risk. And we want down the road for companies and states and local governments to take a look at those five levels of threat and then come up with protective measures.

Depending on the level of threat, what does your department do. Now, the federal government has done that. They've all done that. But we want companies to do the same thing. We want -- most of the states are now developing their own plans. So I kind of segue into, it's not just the level of threat; what do we do as a country based on our assessment of the threat to protect ourselves.

Jay Leno said, in one of his monologues one night, he said, hey Governor Ridge, he said, this new, color-coded system, he says, it's got five colors. He says, Americans have trouble with the three colors in the traffic light. What makes you think they're going to deal with five? (Laughter.)

Well, we're going to deal with five, and for every level of threat, we will in time have a level of protective measures that we will undertake.

MR. SESNO: So we'll see more specificity with --

GOVERNOR RIDGE: We'll keep working on that. We've got to make sure -- the system has to mature.

MR. SESNO: We've got about a minute left or so. Any closing remarks? The floor is yours.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Yes. For those who participated today and for those who have had a chance to observe, it's a little presumptuous for someone that's been designated as a Secretary to presume that the confirmation will get Senate support. I'm hopeful, and I guess I'm allowed to be a little optimistic, because I'm here. (Laughter.)

But the fact of the matter is that this is a unique and it's an historic opportunity. And there are a lot of people that we could point to who have risen to the occasion of dealing with the enormous change and powerful circumstances. And I was looking to try to find one in our history that you might relate to. Abraham Lincoln said at one time, at his second inaugural, when he told us that "the occasion was piled high with difficulty." But it was under those circumstances that he asked America to think and to act anew. "History will not escape us," said Lincoln.

Well, we've got a unique opportunity in our history right now to do it now, to do it right, and not only to build a department, but to make America a safer place. You know, I take a look at myself, my kids are 15 and 16, and I have a pretty good life. I'm 57 years of age and I've lived in this country where things are about as good as they've ever been any place, anywhere at any time. But now I take a look at my kids and your kids and your grandkids, and suddenly we've got this new threat. And it's incumbent on all of us who are given the opportunity to do something about it, to understand that together we can fulfill the mission.

And I'm absolutely convinced that we can. And I look forward to partnering with each and every one of you, with our

colleagues of state government, everybody else to get this done.

One final word. I didn't answer all your questions today and you're going to have a lot more. We'll make sure that we, our communication is regular and honest and candid. And together, as I said before, we'll fulfill our mission.

Thank you very, very much. (Applause.)

MR. SESNO: Governor Ridge, thank you very much. I want to remind the audience here and those who may be watching at home or elsewhere, that if there's any part of this conversation that you'd like to see or to reference, you can go to www.dhs.gov -- that's Department of Homeland Security dot gov. to see the videostreamed version of this. So in the spirit of the 21st century, we are there.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: We're there.

MR. SESNO: Governor, thank you very much and good luck.

GOVERNOR RIDGE: Thanks, all. Thank you.

END 3:01 P.M. EST

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