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PRESIDENT
GEORGE W. BUSH

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Vice President's Remarks at the Opening of the Department of Homeland Security Operations Center

Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C.

2:45 P.M. EDT

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I want to thank you, Tom, for your warm welcome. It's nice to be back, and also to see the tremendous progress that's been made. This is obviously, I guess -- I don't know, is this the formal opening?

SECRETARY RIDGE: It is.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: It's around the opening of the new Homeland Security Operations Center. But it really is remarkable the amount of progress that has been made. And on behalf of the President, I'm here today to thank all of you for the work you've done to get us up and running.

It's an enormously important mission, obviously. And I think we've all been reminded recently that the threat level is high out there, and continues because of the nature of the enemy we face; that the duties that you're asked to carry out here are enormously important to the safety and security of the country. You're going to have to stand long hours under a lot of duress, and the crucial moments of any crisis come when everybody is tired and exhausted, and then you've really got to rise to the occasion. But we have great confidence in all of you and your ability to do the job we've asked you to do for us.

I want to thank the Secretary today for showing me around. Tom and I have known each other for a long time -- since we served in the House of Representatives many years ago, when we both had real influence. And I'm delighted to be back, and Tom does a superb job. And he's been with us now since, I guess, October of '01, shortly after 9/11. And we're delighted to have him heading up the team.

This is a very important step forward, I think, in terms of securing the nation. The ability to collect and integrate critical information across departments, as well as vertically with state and local units of government in the private sector is absolutely vital. One of the complaints I've always received as I get out around the country, especially talking with local officials, is you've got to give us more information, feed us more information. Let us have access to the kind of intelligence you've got. And I think we've finally achieved a level of proficiency in that area so that the system really will function in ways that will make it far easier for them to do their job, as well, too.

As Tom said, you can't defend the nation from just inside the Beltway. It's in no small part a matter of getting all of those folks out, all around the country actively engaged, vigilant, watching what's going on in their communities around them, obviously, and the various key sectors of our economy, as well as our state and local law enforcement and first responders to be on the watch and actively engaged at all times. And the Homeland Security Operations Center and the work that you do here will now be absolutely crucial to that process.

The lessons I think we learned on 9/11 were that the United States is in fact a battlefield, if you will, in the war on terror. The notion that our conflicts can be fought overseas and we're safe and secure here at home, I think, was pretty well put to rest on 9/11. And we now know that we have to stay actively engaged and vigilant if we're going to defend ourselves here at home, as well as take the battle to the enemy overseas, which we've also done.

Nearly three years now have passed without another attack on our soil, yet as all of you know so well, and as the Secretary reminded Americans earlier today, the terrorist threat to America remains. That's why the President and I will continue working to do everything we can to improve the government's capability to protect the American people. We've already tripled funding for homeland security since 2001 to over \$30 billion. We transformed the mission of the FBI to focus on preventing terrorist attacks, not just prosecuting lawbreakers; worked with Congress to pass the Patriot Act to provide better tools for our law enforcement and intelligence agencies to be able to protect us here at home; and of course, stood up the Department of Homeland Security -- the biggest governmental reorganization since 1948.

DHS has now been operating for more than 16 months. I think you can take pride in some extraordinary accomplishments including continuing the overhaul of security at our airports and onboard commercial aircraft, from the curb to the cockpit; improvements in security at our borders and ports, including the new program to inspect cargo shipments at foreign harbors before they depart for our shores; and of course, deployment of new technologies to detect and defend against chemical, biological and radiological attack. All these efforts feed into your mission to integrate critical information here at the Homeland Security Operations Center. And across the country, Homeland Security personnel now count on this center to evaluate and disseminate the most urgent information about any kind of threat, and to help coordinate the immediate response to any emergency.

All Americans have reason, I believe, to be confident in the abilities of the men and women employed here. I'm tremendously impressed by the operations I've seen on my tour today, by the talent and the dedication of the employees. And your versatility, your broad expertise and commitment to teamwork, I think, will serve America well in the years ahead.

So once again, congratulations on getting the new center up and running, and thank you for your service to the nation. (Applause.)

END 2:52 P.M. EDT

Return to this article at:

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