

Remarks on the Nomination of Jeh C. Johnson To Be Secretary of Homeland Security

October 18, 2013

The President. Good afternoon, everybody. Please have a seat. As President, my most solemn responsibility is the safety and security of the American people. And we've got an outstanding team here of folks who work every single day to make sure that we're doing everything we can to fulfill that responsibility. And that means that our entire Government—our law enforcement and homeland security professionals, our troops, our diplomats, our intelligence personnel—are all working together. It means working with State and local partners to disrupt terrorist attacks, to make our borders more secure, respond to natural disasters, and make our immigration system more effective and fair.

Now, addressing any one of these challenges is a tall order. Addressing all of them at once is a monumental task. But that's what the dedicated men and women of the Department of Homeland Security do every day. And today I'm proud to announce my choice to lead them, an outstanding public servant who I've known and trusted for years, Mr. Jeh Johnson.

Now, we are, of course, enormously grateful to Secretary Janet Napolitano. Janet couldn't be here today; she's already made her move to her new position in sunny California, overseeing the higher education system in that great State. And I know that she's going to do an outstanding job there with the incredible young people that are in our largest State. But we all deeply appreciate the terrific job that she did over the last 4½ years. I want to thank Rand Beers for his service and for stepping in as Acting Secretary after Janet left.

Thanks in no small part to Janet's leadership, her team, we've done more to protect our homeland against those who wish to do us harm. We've strengthened our borders. We've taken steps to make sure our immigration system better reflects our values. We've helped thousands of Americans recover from hurricanes and tornados, floods and wildfires. And we've worked to clean up a massive oil spill in the Gulf as well as address a flu pandemic.

In Jeh Johnson, we have the right person to continue this important work. From the moment I took office, Jeh was an absolutely critical member of my national security team, and he demonstrated again and again the qualities that will make him a strong Secretary of Homeland Security.

Jeh has a deep understanding of the threats and challenges facing the United States. As Pentagon's—as the Pentagon's top lawyer, he helped design and implement many of the policies that have kept our country safe, including our success in dismantling the core of Al Qaida in the FATA.

When I directed my national security team to be more open and transparent about how our policies work and how we make decisions, especially when it comes to preventing terrorist attacks, Jeh was one of the leaders who spoke eloquently about how we meet today's threats in a way that are consistent with our values, including the rule of law.

Jeh also knows that meeting these threats demands cooperation and coordination across our Government. He's been there in the Situation Room at the table in moments of decision, working with leaders from a host of agencies to make sure everyone is rowing in the same

direction. And he's respected across our Government as a team player, somebody who knows how to get folks who don't always agree to work towards a common goal.

Jeh has experience leading large, complex organizations. As a member of the Pentagon's senior management team, first under Bob Gates and then under Leon Panetta, he helped oversee the work of more than 3 million military and civilian personnel across the country and around the world. And I think it's fair to say that both former Secretaries Gates and Panetta will attest to the incredible professionalism that Jeh brings to the job and the bipartisan approach that, appropriately, he takes when it comes to national security.

He's also earned a reputation as a cool and calm leader. Jeh appreciates that any organization's greatest asset is its people, and at the Pentagon, he guided the report explaining why allowing our men and women in uniform to serve their country openly would not weaken our military. Congress ended up using that report that Jeh helped to craft to justify repealing "don't ask, don't tell." And America and our military are stronger because we did, in part because of Jeh's determined leadership. I know he will bring that same commitment to our hard-working folks at DHS.

And finally, Jeh believes, in a deep and personal way, that keeping America safe requires us also upholding the values and civil liberties that make America great. Jeh tells the story of his uncle who was a member of the legendary Tuskegee Airmen during World War II. And he and his fellow airmen served with honor, even when their country didn't treat them with the dignity and the respect that they deserved. And it was a lesson that Jeh never forgot. "We must adopt legal positions that comport with common sense," Jeh says, "consistent with who we are as Americans." Jeh is a pretty good lawyer, so he knows what that means.

And Jeh understands that this country is worth protecting, not because of what we build or what we own, but because of who we are. And that's what sets us apart. That's why, as a nation, we have to keep adapting to changing threats, whether natural or manmade. We have to stay ready when disaster strikes and help Americans recover in the aftermath. We've got to fix our broken immigration system in a way that strengthens our borders and modernizes legal immigration and makes sure everybody is playing by the same rules.

And I'm confident that I could not make a better choice in Jeh, somebody who I'm confident is going to be moving not just the agency forward, but helping to move the country forward.

So, Jeh, thank you so much for agreeing to take on this very difficult and extraordinary mission. You've got a great team over at DHS, and I know that they're looking forward to having you over there. I urge the Senate to confirm Jeh as soon as possible. And I thank you, as well as your family, to agreeing to serve. Your wife Susan and your daughter Natalie and—couldn't be here because they're visiting Jeh, Jr., out at Occidental College, which, by the way, I went to for 2 years when I was young. It's a fine college. I'm sorry I couldn't be there to say hi to him. But your son chose well.

So, ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to invite Jeh Johnson to say a few words, hopefully, our next Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security.

Secretary-designate Johnson. Thank you very much, Mr. President.

As you noted, my wife and two kids are not here because it's parents' weekend at Occidental, and thanks to the cost of a nonrefundable airline ticket—[laughter]—they could not be in two places at once. They wish they could be here.

Thank you for the tremendous honor of this nomination and the trust you have placed in me to carry out this large and important responsibility as Secretary of Homeland Security. I was not looking for this opportunity. I had left Government at the end of last year and was settling back into private life and private law practice. But when I received the call, I could not refuse it.

I am a New Yorker, and I was present in Manhattan on 9/11, which happens to be my birthday, when that bright and beautiful day was—a day something like this—was shattered by the largest terrorist attack on our homeland in history. I wandered the streets of New York that day and wondered and asked, what can I do? Since then, I have tried to devote myself to answering that question. I love this country. I care about the safety of our people. I believe in public service. And I remain loyal to you, Mr. President.

If confirmed by the Senate, I promise all of my energy, focus, and ability toward the task of safeguarding our Nation's national and homeland security.

Thank you again, sir.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:06 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Susan M. DiMarco, wife, Natalie Johnson and Jeh Johnson, Jr., children, of Secretary-designate Johnson. He also referred to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan.

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