

Remarks Honoring the National Association of Police Organizations'
Top Cops
October 9, 1998

Tom, I accept the deal. [Laughter] Thank you for your work, on behalf of the law enforcement officers of our country. I want to thank Bob Scully as well, the executive director of NAPO. Thank you, Madam Attorney General, for all the support you have given to local law enforcement for 6 years now. I want to thank the Top Cops, their families, and their friends who are here. And I'd like to thank the Members of Congress who are here, supporters of law enforcement all: Senator Robb, Congresswoman Harman, Congresswoman McCarthy, Congressman Rogan, and Congressman Torres, who's here with some of his family. We're delighted to see all of you.

I'd like to say a special word of appreciation to those of you who brought your families and the children here as a clear reminder to us of what we've really come to honor today.

This July, just a mile from here in the Capitol Rotunda, I had the sad responsibility as President to honor the courage and the sacrifice of the two officers, J.J. Chestnut and Detective John Gibson, who were killed because they literally threw themselves between an assassin's bullets and innocent bystanders. They gave their lives to defend our freedom's house.

The men and women we honor here today put on their badges every day, prepared to make the same kind of sacrifice in their own communities. They are true American heroes. They have done astonishing acts of humanity and heroism, from crossing the line of fire to rescue wounded fellow officers to confronting criminals armed with assault weapons and body armor, to nursing a seriously injured neighbor back to health, to breaking in on a person with a bomb that was partially activated and—thank God—did not go up and blow them all away. And one of these officers, shot four times himself, including twice—once in the neck and once in the head, maintained his consciousness enough to save the life of a cab driver when the person who shot him had a gun at his head.

These stories of all these people are literally breathtaking. I hope that the members of the media who are here today who are covering this will find the time to read the specific cases

of those whom we honor today and tell their stories across America. The story of the brave officer from New Hampshire who dealt with that terrible tragedy and the story of the officers from north Hollywood, because of the volume of fire that was involved in their incident, have been told beyond the borders of their States. But all these stories deserve to be told, and I hope they will be, because we honor here today, as I say again, both the heroism and the humanity that reflect the best of good, professional law enforcement.

We owe a great debt of gratitude to our Nation's police officers. And for 6 years we have worked, as Tom said and as the Attorney General noted, to give our law enforcement officers the tools they need to succeed at their jobs. We have worked to take back our streets from crime and violence with a comprehensive plan based on what law enforcement said we should be doing: new penalties on our books that were tough when they should be tough; efforts to help keep young people out of trouble in the first place; efforts to keep guns out of the hands of criminals; and most of all, efforts to put 100,000 more police on our streets.

Six years ago there were many Americans who believed that a rising crime rate was a problem that would be with us always. Today, because of efforts like those whom we honor, we have the lowest level of crime in 25 years. Respect for the law is on the rise. Our Nation's law enforcement officers are at the very center of this effort. They are cracking down on gun traffickers. They are working to keep guns out of the hands of criminals. They are working with local school authorities to keep our schools safe and drug-free. They are walking the beat and working with residents to prevent crime and to keep kids out of trouble in the first place.

But as all of them know, and as all of you know, this is not a problem we can afford to just congratulate ourselves on. Our country is still too violent. We still lose too many children. We still lose too many police officers. We have to take some more steps. And today I'd like to just mention a couple.

First, as Tom said so eloquently, all the cynics and the critics were wrong. These police are making a difference in our communities. We are well on our way; we're under a budget and ahead of schedule in our efforts to put 100,000 police on the street. Today we are awarding \$30 million in new grant money to help communities hire more police. This will bring the total of police officers funded by the crime bill in 1994 and subsequent appropriations to more than 88,000. We are literally almost 90 percent of the way toward meeting our goal.

Second, we know what a difference the Brady background checks have made to keep illegal guns off our streets. I am pleased to say that we will give States \$40 million to help them computerize the criminal history records they use to do those background checks, a simple procedure that has already stopped a quarter of a million fugitives and felons from purchasing guns, and saves who knows how many lives. These steps will help us to give law enforcement the tools they need.

Last night Congress passed a bill by a large bipartisan margin that will build on our progress, a bill I'll sign into law later today. It will provide States with more than a billion dollars over the next 5 years to modernize not only their criminal records systems but also to upgrade their communications and criminal identification systems. It will include legislation I proposed last year at the White House Conference on Child Care the First Lady and I sponsored, to help us build a new electronic information sharing partnership with State and local law enforcement to keep our child care and our elder care systems safe. I am pleased that Congress has taken this step to give law enforcement more tools to make a greater difference.

At the same time, I have to tell you there is one thing going on in Congress that I am very, very concerned about, an effort to undermine the very Brady law protections that have helped to make our streets and our police safer. The legislation would deny the FBI the full funds it needs to do the most effective background checks possible and would also impose undue administrative burdens on the FBI, threatening to bring this vitally important system to a halt. When we stood with America's police officers to pass the Brady law, it was a dramatic step forward. We cannot take an unacceptable step backward.

This law is working. And all the fears that were raised about it by people who said good sportsmen would lose their guns and people would be subject to unconscionable hassles, it all turned out to be a bunch of bull. All it has done is save lives. Why are we trying to mess with something that works, that saves lives, that makes law enforcement safer, that makes people safer? It is a terrible mistake. And I ask you all to help me stop it.

Now, this amendment was first proposed last summer, and I said then I would oppose it. So I will say again: I intend to oppose any effort to weaken the Brady law and to put guns back into the hands of felons and fugitives. We're going in the right direction. Let's don't make that mistake again.

Think of the stories here today. Every one of you out here represents or came with somebody who is up here today. Now, you just think about how many stories there would be like the ones we're celebrating today—and we're sitting here thanking the good Lord that at least these people are alive—you think how many more stories there would be, not only to honor but to mourn, if we were to turn our back on what we've been doing for the last 6 years.

So I say again, the Congress has made a lot of progress. It has increasingly been bipartisan on this law enforcement issue. Let's not take a step backward.

Now, before I close, let me once again thank the Top Cops for their remarkable achievements. And again let me say, I want to thank all of you who are members of their families. In so many ways, you make these achievements possible. You share the sacrifice, and you share the fear, and sometimes you have to share the loss. We know that. Therefore, you have to provide your own special brand of courage, and for that we are also profoundly grateful.

We honor all of you, your strength and your spirit, and from the bottom of our hearts, we thank you for what you have done to make America a better place.

Thank you very much, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:57 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Thomas J. Scotto, president, and Robert T. Scully, executive director, National Association of Police Organizations.