

Department of State headquarters building. In his remarks, he referred to President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal.

Remarks Following a Meeting With the Homeland Security Council and
an Exchange With Reporters
October 29, 2001

The President. Today I had the first official meeting of the Homeland Security Council—Governor—that has been chaired by—when I’m not here, by Governor Ridge. And as you can see, I’ve assembled many of the members of my administration here, senior members of the administration, because our task is to do everything we can to protect the American people from any threat whatsoever.

The American people are beginning to understand that we fight a two-front war against terror. We fight in Afghanistan, and I appreciate so very much the efforts of our men and women who wear the uniform. And we fight it at home here, to make sure America is as safe as possible.

Along these lines, we’ve set up a Foreign Terrorist Tracking Task Force to make sure that the Land of the Free is as safe as possible from people who might come to our country to hurt people. We welcome legal immigrants, and we welcome people coming to America. We welcome the process that encourages people to come to our country to visit, to study, and to work. What we don’t welcome are people who come to hurt the American people. And so, therefore, we’re going to be very diligent with our visas and observant with the behavior of people who come to this country.

As an example, if a person applies for a student visa and gets that visa, we want to make sure that person actually goes to school; in other words, if they’re using the visas for the intended purpose.

The American people need to know that we’re doing everything we possibly can to prevent and disrupt any attack on America and that we’re doing everything we can to respond to attacks. And I’m proud of the public health workers, people that report to Tommy Thompson’s agency, about their hard work. They’re working hours on hours. And I believe that lives have been saved as a result of their diligent efforts.

Be glad to answer a couple of questions. Fournier [Ron Fournier, Associated Press], then Dave [David Gregory, NBC News], then Stretch [Richard Keil, Bloomberg News], then Steve [Steve Holland, Reuters].

Operation Enduring Freedom

Q. Mr. President, thank you. Yesterday there was quite a bit of talk on Capitol Hill about the need for ground troops to step up the military action another notch—Senator McCain, Senator Dodd, among others. Do you think the American public is ready for a significant number of ground troops in Afghanistan?

The President. I think the most important thing that the American people realize is that we’re steady and determined and patient, that we’ve got a strategy in place to bring Al Qaida to justice and at the same time make it clear that any nation which harbors terrorists will be held accountable for their decisions. And we are implementing our strategy, and we appreciate any suggestions people may have.

But the strategy we have at the time right now is to use our military to dismantle

Taliban defenses, use our military to destroy Al Qaida training bases, and to work with troops that now exist on the ground to fulfill our mission. And I am pleased with the progress we're making.

And I'm really pleased with the fact that the American people are patient. They realize this is a war the likes of which they have never seen before. And therefore, they are rooting on their Government and the men and women who wear the uniform. They understand that it's going to take a while to achieve our objective, and I appreciate that patience.

Steve.

Immigration Policy

Q. Sir, since so many of the hijackers were in the country legally, do you plan to crack down on student visas or political asylum cases, things of that sort?

The President. Well, we plan on making sure that if a person has applied for a student visa, they actually go to college or a university. And therefore, we're going to start asking a lot of questions that heretofore have not been asked.

We're going to tighten up the visa policy. That's not to say that we're not going to let people come into our country; of course we are. But we're going to make sure that when somebody comes, we understand their intended purpose and that they fulfill the purpose that they—on their application.

You bring up a very good point, Steve, and that is that sometimes people come here with no intention to fulfill their purpose. And when we find those, they will be escorted out of the United States.

Domestic Response to Terrorism

Q. Mr. President, a couple of weeks ago the FBI issued an alert indicating that within several days the country could be attacked by terrorists again. Does the Government still believe and have information to support the notion that Usama bin Laden is planning a second wave of attacks, and do you believe that all of the resources

now dedicated to the anthrax situation reduce the country's level of preparedness?

The President. We believe that the country must stay on alert, that there is—that our enemies still hate us. Our enemies have no values that regard life as precious. They're active, and therefore, we're constantly in touch with our law enforcement officials to be prepared.

Now, having said that, the American people must go about their lives. And I recognize it's a fine balance. But the American people also understand that the object of any terrorist activity is to cause Americans to abandon their lifestyles. Every American is a soldier, and every citizen is in this fight. And I am proud of our country. Our country is united and strong, and we're prepared. We've got ample resources to fight the war on the homefront on many fronts. And part of our purpose for being here is to make sure that those resources are well organized and that fit into a strategy that this administration is designing.

Stretch.

National Economy

Q. We have some new consumer confidence numbers coming out tomorrow, so perhaps this would be a better question to ask then. But based on what you're hearing from all of the people in this room, what is your sense of the extent which the terrorist attacks, now the anthrax mailings, are having on the consumer? And is it your sense that people really are hunkering down, they're apprehensive, they're—are they finding it difficult to get back to their daily routines?

The President. Well, I haven't seen the numbers, but my view of the mood of the country is, is that the country understands we've entered into a new period in our history, and that there is a—that lives are simply not going to be as normal as they were in the past, and that so long as there is terrorist activities in the world and directed toward our country, that people are

going to have to be diligent and on guard. And they are.

Now, having said that, the American people are very patient, and they appreciate the efforts of the Government, and they appreciate the efforts of our military. They understand better than most, better than the world, that this is going to take a long period of time, and they are prepared for this. They are prepared to wait in long lines at airports. They're prepared to support our military. They are prepared to support local law enforcement as local law enforcement works hard with Federal officials to disrupt any potential terrorist activities.

And so, the mood of the country is certainly different from what it was on September the 10th, but I find the mood of the country to be incredibly refreshing and strong and powerful. It is a clear statement to anybody who would want to harm us that instead of weakening America, they have strengthened America.

And how that—what that means to the economy, it means that the—it means that over time, our economy is going to be just as strong as the American spirit. And so I'm very optimistic about the economy. How long it will take to recover to the levels that we hope is just—is beyond my pay grade. But I can tell you that the people of this country are strong and resolute, and for that I am grateful and incredibly proud.

Last question.

Immigration Policy

Q. Mr. President, we understand this task force is to help tighten and close the loopholes in immigration laws. Why were these loopholes so vast, and why were they left for so long? And also, what do you say to the American public who is concerned about anti-American sentiment among Americans who may have helped these immigrants who came in and started September the 11th?

The President. Well, first, I—you know, our country has been an incredibly gen-

erous country, the most generous country in the world. We're generous with our universities; we're generous with our job opportunities; we're generous with the—what a beautiful system it is, that if you come here and you work hard, you can achieve a dream.

Never did we realize then that people would take advantage of our generosity to the extent they have. September the 11th taught us an interesting lesson, that while by far the vast majority of people who have come to America are really good, decent people, people that we're proud to have here, there are some who are evil. And our job now is to find the evil ones and to bring them to justice, to disrupt anybody who might have designs on hurting—further hurting Americans.

The second part of your question? Sorry.

Domestic Support for Terrorists

Q. The second part is about the Americans in this country who—some may have helped the terrorists.

The President. I think Americans who unwittingly helped people that hurt Americans regret that now. Americans who are willingly participants and have plans to hurt America, they will be brought to justice. My judgment is, anybody who is a terrorist or helps a terrorist are equally culpable. And so, we're doing everything we can, obviously within the law.

And we've got now a new law that will help us pursue those who would harm Americans and those who would help them harm Americans. People need to be held accountable in America, and we're going to do just that.

Thank you all.

NOTE: The exchange began at 3:10 p.m. in the Cabinet Room at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Usama bin Laden, leader of the Al Qaida terrorist organization. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.