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**Remarks at the White House
Conference on Missing, Exploited,
and Runaway Children**

October 2, 2002

Thanks for coming. One of the reasons I like this job so much is, you get to be introduced by your wife. [*Laughter*] And I appreciate Laura's love and compassion for all children, and I appreciate the job she's doing. I'm a lucky man to be able to call her my wife—call her my wife. And thanks for coming.

The kidnaping of a child is every parent's worst nightmare. Yet, too many moms and dads have experienced this nightmare across America. Too many have suffered. I've just met with parents—Laura and I met with parents—who have had the most precious person in their lives suddenly and brutally taken away from them. Some of these parents were eventually reunited with their children. Some are still hoping and waiting. Some know they will never see their loved ones again in this earthly life.

When a child's life or liberty or innocence is taken, it is a terrible, terrible loss. And those responsible have committed a terrible crime. Our society has a duty, has a solemn duty, to shield children from exploitation and danger. At this conference, we are discussing the steps that parents and community leaders and law enforcement can take to prevent such tragedies.

I want to thank the Justice Department's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children for helping organize this important and vital meeting. And I want to thank you all for coming.

I appreciate the senior members of my administration who are leading the sessions at today's conference. I thank our Secretary of State Colin Powell, Attorney General John Ashcroft, Secretary Tommy Thompson, Secretary Rod Paige. I appreciate the Director of the FBI, Bob Mueller, for coming. And

I want to thank the Commissioner, Robert Bonner, of the U.S. Customs.

I know there's a lot of Members of Congress who are here. I see the great Senator from Texas, Kay Bailey Hutchison, is here, as well as other Members of Congress. Thank you all for coming. Thank you for taking this issue seriously, and thanks for joining with a lot of concerned citizens.

I appreciate so very much the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. They do a really good job for America. I want to thank Ernie Allen—I want to thank Ernie, and I want to thank Carolyn Atwell-Davis, the legal consultant, for their hard work and for their care and concern. I also want to thank Margaret Spellings, who is Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy, for moderating this conference.

And of course, I've got to say something about John Walsh, TV star. But he's a guy who cares deeply about our country, about the safety of our citizens. And John, thank you for the service you do on behalf of the American people.

Our first duty as adults is to create an environment in which children can grow and thrive without fearing for their security. That's what we've got to do. Because children are so vulnerable, they need the care of adults. Because they're so vulnerable, those who are cruel and predatory often target our children.

We see the dangers to our children in the cases of abduction, many of which are known to us all. Each year, tens of thousands of children are abducted by non-family members, often in connection with a crime. And while the overwhelming majority of these children are returned from abductions, too many are not. One is too many, particularly for the mom or dad who suffers deeply.

We see the dangers in the experience of runaway children who are often victims of hunger and sickness and sexual abuse. Every year, assaults and illness and suicide take the lives of about 5,000 runaways. One life is too many.

The threats to our children are found not just on the streets, but they're found on the technology which we use in our homes. The Internet is a wonderful tool for our children to broaden their knowledge, expand their

minds, but the evils of the world have crept into the Internet. In one year alone, one in five children between the ages of 10 and 17 received a sexual solicitation over the Internet. With expanding use of the Internet and the heightened activity of predators searching for underage victims, more children are being lured into harmful and even tragic situations.

In every region in the world, children can be vulnerable, not just here at home but children everywhere. Each year, about a million girls and boys are trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor. Such trafficking is nothing less than a modern form of slavery, an unspeakable and unforgivable crime against the most vulnerable members of the global society. All these dangers put children at risk. All these dangers demand action to protect our children from harm.

The Justice Department has made the prevention and investigation of child abductions a major priority. We're providing State and local authorities with access to fingerprint record and forensic experts and training on missing-children cases. We want the local authorities to have the best available technologies and skills in order to respond quickly. The Department sponsors a 24-hour hotline for reporting missing children, which is operated by the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. We're waging a nationwide effort to prevent use of the Internet to sexually exploit children. We're seeking to almost double the funding for the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces, which will help State and local authorities enforce laws against child pornography and exploitation.

We're vigorously prosecuting those who prey on our children. We need to send a clear message: If you prey on our children, there will be serious, severe consequences.

Earlier this year, in Operation Candyman, the FBI dismantled a major child pornography ring. They made more than 100 arrests. I'm pleased that the House of Representatives passed the "Child Obscenity and Pornography Prevention Act" this year to revise and strengthen our pornography laws. The Senate needs to work with the House to get legislation done before they go home.

We need to do everything we can to protect our children from the evils of pornography.

We will not forget the suffering and struggles of America's runaway children. The Federal Government supports hundreds of emergency shelters and programs that reach out to young people living on the street, offering them food and comfort and counseling. These programs are mainly administered by community and faith-based groups. After all, it's in our faith-based community where we hear that universal call to love a neighbor just like you'd like to be loved yourself. It's in our faith-based groups that we find deep compassion to help those in need and who are troubled. And many of the runaway kids are troubled and in deep need of love.

There are as many as 100,000 runaway children every year. And these children are vulnerable; they're vulnerable to exploitation. There are some great programs in America, people who are soldiers in the armies of compassion, one of which is the Covenant House. We're honored today to have Sister Mary Rose McGeady here. She runs the Covenant House. And if you don't know anything about the Covenant House and if you're interested in helping, support the Covenant House or programs like the Covenant House, because these people help those on the street, those young, vulnerable children on the street, to realize there is love in our society and there is hope for a better way.

On the international front, the United States is acting vigorously against the trafficking of young people. Last February, I established an Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. The task force is working hard to prosecute traffickers, protect victims, and prevent future trafficking. The past year alone, the Department of Justice prosecuted 4 times as many traffickers as it did 2 years ago. We are making progress.

We've got to continue to work with our friends and allies to prevent this scourge from not only spreading but to stop it. It is, as I said earlier, slavery. And this Nation stands against slavery of any kind.

The responsibility to protect America's children is shared throughout our society by government at every level and by parents in

every home. Parents, of course, are the first line of defense against danger. To help our parents protect their children, the Department of Education has distributed a new guidebook providing practical steps that parents can take to make their children safer, practical steps that make it clear about how a parent needs to deal with their child about the dangers facing children. And this information, you'll be pleased to hear, is written in ways so that the children can actually understand what's on the page.

The book tells mothers and fathers how to rehearse with their children what to say or do if they ever feel threatened. It's a practical guide to explain to children how to deal with predators that are smooth and seductive, how to deal with somebody that's a stranger that sounds sweet-talking but may in their heart be dark and dangerous for our children. The book also lists Web sites that provide information about protecting children. Information is powerful, and it's important for our parents to know.

Parents need to pay as much attention to their children, by the way, when they're on the Internet as when they're on a playground. They've got to know what their children are doing on the Internet. They've got to know with whom they're conversing. This guidebook will help. We're passing it out to the Nation's schools, and the schools will then make it available to parents. And as well, parents can request a copy of the guidebook, a practical go-by as to how to train your children how to deal with potential danger. And you can find it on missingkids.com. If you're interested, if you want a practical go-by, call up missingkids.com on the Internet, and you'll get some practical steps as to how to help your children avoid danger.

Sometimes, in spite of a family's best effort, the unthinkable does happen, and that's really sad. It breaks my heart to know that that continues to happen in America. At that point, the parents need the support—when their child is abducted, the parent need immediate support of their communities, quick action to find their children. Time is of the essence.

One of the most successful programs to locate abducted children is what's called the AMBER Plan. It's a voluntary partnership

through which police and local broadcasters issue urgent bulletins to the public as soon as a child is missing. The program began in a local effort in Texas, I'm proud to report, in the Dallas area in 1996 after Amber Hagerman was abducted.

My friend State Senator Florence Shapiro is with us, I believe, one of the panelists. She helped launch the AMBER program. I know that it makes her feel really good to know that AMBER, when in place, can really help people, just like it helped Sharon Brooks and her 16-year-old daughter, Tamara. This summer, Tamara and Jacqueline were abducted at gunpoint in Lancaster, California. Tamara told us her story. The police issued an AMBER Alert within hours and soon received tips that led to their rescue. People all across America shared a great feeling of relief when she and her buddy were rescued. One of the reasons they were is because of the AMBER Plan.

There are gaps in AMBER, however. There are gaps in the AMBER Plan coverage which must be filled, and we can fill them. We will develop more AMBER Plans and better coordination among plans. We should not allow another day to go by without taking steps to expand the AMBER Plan's reach all across our country. And so the Attorney General today is appointing an AMBER Alert Coordinator to help State and local officials develop, enhance, and coordinate AMBER Plans all across America.

The Department of Justice will establish standards for the issuance and dissemination of alerts. The Justice and Transportation Departments will take immediate action to provide a total of \$10 million to improve the growing network of AMBER Plans. We want AMBER Plan Alerts to be issued as quickly and as effectively as possible, including electronic billboards along the Nation's highways.

I support legislation passed by Senator Hutchison of Texas and Senator Feinstein of California to achieve the goals I just outlined and codify them in law. And I want to thank you both for your hard work. The House hasn't acted yet, so I am going to. And that's why I've just laid out the initiative. If possible, it would be very helpful if the House passed the Hutchison-Feinstein law before they go home.

I also am pleased that good corporate citizens are involved with helping our children. And I particularly want to point out Toys R Us or Wal-Mart, Home Depot, as well as Ford Motor dealerships, which are providing free child photo IDs, so that parents can provide law enforcement with sharply focused head-and-shoulder pictures along with relevant biological information in the event of emergency. By the end of this year, more than 2½ million children will have been photographed and identified to help recover them if they're ever abducted.

I hope a lot of other companies follow these good citizens' example. I hope you make available resources necessary to help us combat—to fight against abduction and to help save those lives—save the lives of those who have fallen prey to one of the worst crimes in our society.

This White House Conference on Missing and Exploited and Runaway Children is important for America. It just is. And I want to thank you all for coming. This is the beginning of a refocused effort at the Federal level to help save people's lives. This is an attempt—more than an attempt—this is the beginning of a successful strategy implemented at all levels of government and all parts of our society to recognize a real threat and to deal with it, to recognize there are some so evil in our society that they're willing to harm our most precious and most vulnerable citizens, and to be prepared to respond quickly when that happens, to help people prevent it from happening in the first place, to make it clear, if you do it and we catch you, there's going to be serious consequences for you.

We can deal with this problem, because this is America. This is a country full of people who love and care. It's a compassionate and decent nation. This is the beginning of a concerted effort to do our duty as responsible citizens of the greatest country on the face of the Earth.

Again, I want to thank you all for taking your citizenship seriously. I want to thank you for understanding that a patriot is somebody more than who just puts their hand on their heart; a patriot is somebody who is willing to do whatever you can to make this

country the best—continue to be the best on the face of our Earth.

May God bless your efforts. May God bless our children. And may God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:09 p.m. in the Atrium Hall at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center. In his remarks, he referred to Ernie Allen, president and chief executive officer, Carolyn Atwell-Davis, government relations liaison, and John Walsh, co-founder, National Center for Missing and Exploited Children; Sister Mary Rose McGeady, president, Covenant House; Texas State Senator Florence Shapiro; and Jacqueline Marris, who was abducted with Tamara Brooks in Lancaster, CA, on August 1. The President also referred to H.R. 4623, the proposed "Child Obscenity and Pornography Prevention Act of 2002," and S. 2986, the proposed "National AMBER Alert Network Act of 2002."

Remarks Announcing Bipartisan Agreement on a Joint Resolution To Authorize the Use of United States Armed Forces Against Iraq

October 2, 2002

The President. Thank you all for coming. Today I'm joined by leaders of the House and the Senate from both political parties to show our unity of purpose in confronting a gathering threat to the security of America and to the future of peace.

I want to thank in particular Speaker Hastert and Leader Gephardt, Leader Lott, for the tremendous work in building bipartisan support on this vital issue. I also want to thank Senators Warner, Lieberman, McCain, and Bayh for introducing this resolution, which we've agreed to on the floor of the Senate this morning.

The text of our bipartisan resolution is clear, and it is strong. The statement of support from the Congress will show to friend and enemy alike the resolve of the United States. In Baghdad, the regime will know that full compliance with all U.N. security demands is the only choice and that time remaining for that choice is limited.

On its present course, the Iraqi regime is a threat of unique urgency. We know the treacherous history of the regime. It has waged a war against its neighbors. It has