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Remarks on the Nomination of Michael O. Leavitt To Be Secretary of Health and Human Services

December 13, 2004

The President. Thank you. Good morning. I am pleased to announce the nomination of Michael O. Leavitt as the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Last year I welcomed Mike to my Cabinet as the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. In that office, he has enforced high standards and a spirit of cooperation and with good common sense. He has upheld this administration's commitment to sustain improvements in the quality of the natural environment. He has managed the EPA with skill and with a focus on results. I've come to know Mike as a fine executive, as a man of great compassion. He is an ideal choice to lead one of the largest departments of the United States Government.

The Department of Health and Human Services touches the life of every person in this country. From the safety of our food and medicine to the Medicare program to preparing for any kind of health emergency, HHS has comprehensive responsibilities for the health of Americans. To meet those responsibilities, the Department needs many thousands of skilled professionals and a leader who is able to act on many fronts all at once.

For the last 4 years, HHS has served the American people extremely well under the energetic leadership of Tommy Thompson. Early in his tenure, our Nation went on a wartime footing and had to prepare for emergencies of a kind never seen before. Secretary Thompson led the effort to prepare the medical infrastructure for any terrorist challenge.

At the same time, he has presided over dramatic increases in medical research, adding to the promise of hopeful new cures. He's helped set in motion major improvements in Medicare, which will benefit seniors all across America. He has worked closely with State and local officials to ensure that public health programs function as effectively as possible. And throughout his career as Governor and as Secretary of Health and Human Services, Tommy Thompson has led efforts to reform welfare laws and to help more people transition from welfare to work. Tommy Thompson is a good friend who has given every day of the last 38 years to public service. As he and Sue Ann move on to new challenges, Tommy has my deep gratitude for a job well done.

My new nominee for HHS Secretary, like Tommy Thompson, served many years as a Governor. The people of Utah elected Mike Leavitt to three terms, and during his administration, Utah was named one of the best managed State governments in the country. Governor Leavitt was a leader in welfare reform, resource management, and environmental stewardship. He improved child welfare services in the State and made strides toward expanding access to health care for children. He made government services more accessible through the Internet, and he always insisted that the government remain accountable to the people it serves.

When confirmed by the Senate, Mike Leavitt will be charged with a broad agenda for the health and safety of the American people. In this new term, we will implement the first-ever prescription drug benefit for seniors under Medicare. We will expand Federal cooperation with faith-based groups that provide essential services, such as counseling and treatment for addictions. We will continue pursuing the great promise of medical research, always ensuring that the work is carried out with vigor and moral integrity. We will not relent in our efforts to protect the American people from disease and the use of disease as a weapon against us.

Mike Leavitt is the right leader to lead HHS in meeting all these vital commitments. I thank him for accepting this new responsibility. I also thank his wife, Jackie, and their son Westin for being with us today. I urge the Senate to confirm Governor Leavitt's nomination as soon as possible.

Congratulations.

[*At this point, Secretary-Designate Leavitt made brief remarks.*]

The President. Good job.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:38 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Secretary-Designate

Leavitt. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom

December 14, 2004

The President. Good morning, and welcome to the White House. Laura and I are proud to have you all here today, especially our three honorees and their families and their friends.

The Presidential Medal of Freedom is our Nation's highest civil award, given to men and women of exceptional merit, integrity, and achievement. Today this honor goes to three men who have played pivotal roles in great events and whose efforts have made our country more secure and advanced the cause of human liberty.

George Tenet learned the value of hard work as a busboy in the 20th Century Diner, the family restaurant in Queens, New York. Between work and school and athletics, George always kept up with current events and world affairs, and that enthusiasm led him into public service.

In Washington, George immersed himself in the field of intelligence work. After a long career in the legislative and executive branches of Government, George was tapped by President Bill Clinton to run the Agency he loved. His challenges at the CIA were many. George acted quickly and aggressively to rebuild the Agency's capabilities. He made the recruitment of new talent a top priority. Applications to join the Agency have now soared to more than 138,000 per year. Under George's leadership, the number of yearly graduates from the Clandestine Service Training Program have increased nearly sixfold. And just about every CIA officer can tell you a story about Director Tenet's hands-on style of management. He was often seen in the hallways, chewing on an unlit cigar—[*laughter*]—or showing up at their cafeteria table and talking shop.

George and his wife, Stephanie, came to know the people of the CIA, and the people of the CIA came to know them as decent, caring people who love their country and love their family, especially their son, John Michael.

Early in his tenure as DCI, George Tenet was one of the first to recognize and address the growing threat to America from radical terrorist networks. Immediately after the attacks of September the 11th, George was ready with a plan to strike back at Al Qaida and to topple the Taliban. CIA officers were on the ground in Afghanistan within days. Seasoned American intelligence officers, armed with laptop computers, Afghan clothes, and a visionary plan, rode horseback with the fighters of the Northern Alliance, identified key targets for our military, and helped to free a nation.

Since those weeks, CIA officers have remained on the hunt for Al Qaida killers. More than three-quarters of Al Qaida key members and associates have been killed or detained, and the majority were stopped as a result of CIA efforts. CIA officers were also among the first to enter the battle in Iraq, alongside their colleagues in uniform. In these years of challenge for our country, the men and women of the CIA have been on the frontlines of an urgent cause, and the whole Nation owes them our gratitude.

George is rightly proud of the people of the Agency, and I have been proud to work with George. George has carried great authority without putting on airs, because he remembers his roots. There's still a lot of Queens in George Tenet. [*Laughter*] A colleague once said that "George has the intellect of a scholar and the demeanor of a longshoreman." [*Laughter*] His tireless efforts have brought justice to America's enemies and greater security to the American people. And today we honor a fine public servant and patriot in George John Tenet.

General Tommy Franks was raised in Midland, Texas. Nothing wrong with that. [*Laughter*] I didn't know him then, but Laura and he went to the same high school. In those days, some people in Midland wondered about Tommy's future. Sounds familiar. [*Laughter*] At a recent high school reunion, Tommy's old principal told the general, "You weren't the brightest bulb in the socket," to which the general replied, "Ain't this a great country?" [*Laughter*]