

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB BREAKFAST ADDRESS BY ATTORNEY GENERAL ALBERTO
GONZALES

TOPIC: THE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT'S RESPONSE TO VIOLENT CRIME

MODERATOR: JERRY ZREMSKI, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

LOCATION: NATIONAL PRESS CLUB BALLROOM, WASHINGTON, D.C.

TIME: 9:05 A.M. EDT

DATE: TUESDAY, MAY 15, 2007

(C) COPYRIGHT 2005, FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC., 1000 VERMONT AVE.
NW; 5TH FLOOR; WASHINGTON, DC - 20005, USA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ANY
REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION IS EXPRESSLY
PROHIBITED.

UNAUTHORIZED REPRODUCTION, REDISTRIBUTION OR RETRANSMISSION
CONSTITUTES A MISAPPROPRIATION UNDER APPLICABLE UNFAIR COMPETITION
LAW, AND FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. RESERVES THE RIGHT TO PURSUE ALL
REMEDIES AVAILABLE TO IT IN RESPECT TO SUCH MISAPPROPRIATION.

FEDERAL NEWS SERVICE, INC. IS A PRIVATE FIRM AND IS NOT
AFFILIATED WITH THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. NO COPYRIGHT IS CLAIMED AS TO
ANY PART OF THE ORIGINAL WORK PREPARED BY A UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT
OFFICER OR EMPLOYEE AS PART OF THAT PERSON'S OFFICIAL DUTIES.

FOR INFORMATION ON SUBSCRIBING TO FNS, PLEASE CALL JACK GRAEME
AT 202-347-1400.

(Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Good morning, and welcome to the National Press
Club. My name is Jerry Zremski, and I'm Washington bureau chief for
the Buffalo News and president of the National Press Club.

I'd like to welcome club members and their guests who are here
today, along with our audience that's watching on C-SPAN.

We're looking forward to today's speech, and afterwards I will
ask as many questions from the audience as time permits. There are
cards on your tables, and feel free to fill them out with questions.
We also have some questions that have been submitted earlier by our
head table.

I'd also like to explain, for our broadcast audience, if you hear
applause during the speech or during the questions, it may be from
guests of the members who are here today and not from the working
press.

I'd now like to introduce our head table guests and ask them to
stand briefly when their names are called. From your right, Rob

Schmidt, the Justice Department reporter from Bloomberg News; Suzanne Struglinski, Washington bureau chief for the Deseret News; Clarence Page, syndicated columnist for the Chicago Tribune; Greta Van Susteren, host of Fox News Channel's "On the Record"; Brian Roehrkasse, deputy director of Public Affairs at the U.S. Department of Justice and a guest of the speaker; Donna Leinwand, Justice Department reporter for USA Today and treasurer of the National Press Club; Rachel Brand, assistant attorney general for Legal Policy and a guest of the speaker.

Skipping over the podium, Angela Greiling Keane of Bloomberg News, the chair of the NPC Speakers Committee.

Skipping over our speaker for just one second, Melissa Charbonneau, White House correspondent for CBN News and vice chair of our Speakers Committee.

Next, Megan Brown (sp), counsel to the attorney general; Betsy Fischer of NBC's "Meet the Press"; Robert Novak, syndicated columnist from the Chicago Sun-Times, who is today celebrating his 50th anniversary of membership in the National Press Club. (Applause.)

Marilyn Thompson, national investigative editor for the Los Angeles Times; and Jake McClure, reporter for the Legal Times. (Applause.)

Our guest today needs no introduction, and therefore I'm going to keep things very short.

We're pleased that Attorney Alberto Gonzales could join us today to talk about crime and what his department is doing about it. General Gonzales will speak for approximately 20 minutes, and then I will ask him a series of questions sent in by club members both before and during today's breakfast.

So, ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming Attorney General Alberto Gonzales to the National Press Club. (Applause.)

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Thank you.

HECKLER: Mr. Gonzales, resign! You've dishonored your country!

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Thank you. Good morning.

HECKLER: Resign! Please! You've dishonored your country! You've destroyed the Constitution! You've dishonored your country! Resign! You've dishonored your country!

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Only the victims of violent crime and their families can really know and express the depth of the damage that is done by its perpetrators. Now, two nights ago my wife, Rebecca, and I attended the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund Candlelight Vigil just a few blocks from here, and we were reminded of this fact by the families of fallen police officers. I think it's particularly important that we talk about the problem of violent crime during a week when those officers, those patriots who served so bravely to protect our neighborhoods, are honored.

For those who have never attended this annual event, the audience includes thousands of law enforcement officers from around the nation as well as the surviving families and friends of fallen officers. By tradition, those families who have lost a loved one during the most recent year sit in the rows closest to the stage and from my vantage point. I could see the emotions on some of the faces as the names of fallen officers were read out loud.

And after the program, Becky and I went among the audience to offer condolences to some of the survivors. We were particularly moved by one family, a mother, Tamara Sutphin, and her young twin daughters, Rachel and Emily. Last August, Virginia Law Enforcement Officer Eric Sutphin was shot and killed while participating in a manhunt for an escaped prisoner. On Sunday night during the ceremony, the little girls cried for their daddy, and their mother appeared numb with grief. Our words of comfort seemed so inadequate for their loss. And their story is just one of many thousands of examples of the senseless violent crime that occurred last year in this country.

Like many Americans, I grew up in a neighborhood that had little besides hopes and dreams, two things that I consider to be the foundation for realizing the promises of this great nation.

But it's hard to hope, it is hard to pursue your dreams, if you live in fear and you grow up in a neighborhood that is weighed down by gangs and violent crime.

In most neighborhoods, the American dream is utterly reachable. A healthy economy and an overall low crime rates mean that most American children are growing up faithfully in the best environment that freedom on this Earth has to offer. However, recent Justice Department data reflecting the crime rate in 2005 showed slight increases in the rate of violent crimes when compared to 2004. Preliminary numbers for 2006 also predict a small increase. It is important to note that 2005 had the second lowest crime rate on record, surpassed only by 2004.

Now, in general, the current data do not reveal nationwide trends, in my judgment; rather they show increases locally in a number of communities. Each community is facing different circumstances, and in some places, violent crime continues to decrease, but that doesn't change how the families who live in those more violent areas feel and the daily challenges that they must face. In those neighborhoods, mothers fear for their children. In those communities, gang members fight for domination, and on those streets, sometimes even the innocent, bystanders to neighborhood violence, lose their lives.

Government at every level is aware of the problem and is dedicated to addressing it, but we also know that community-specific problems cannot successfully be tackled nationally or unilaterally because crime issues vary from city to city and even between -- among neighborhoods in a single city. No one answer, one approach, one government agency can fix the problem in all of these unique circumstances.

To best address the varied crime challenges faced by communities around the nation, the way forward is at once simple and difficult, and it consists of this: Local law enforcement working with community leaders to develop solutions that best suit their needs; it's very simple. At the Department of Justice, we want to partner with these communities and help in those efforts. Although the federal government does not bear the primary burden in fighting local crime, we do have some specialized expertise and resources that can assist local law enforcement officials who do. We can offer the extra weight of federal prosecution when appropriate, and we possess the means to collect and disseminate best practices and training.

In that sense, the steps that I will tell you about today are not new. The investigators and prosecutors of the department have always been fighting violent crime in America. The FBI's Safe Streets Task Forces, for example, focus on dismantling violent organized crime, gangs that wreak havoc in cities and towns across the country as well as investigating violent criminals involved in federal robberies, carjackings, murders and kidnappings. The ATF's investigative priorities focus on armed violent offenders and career criminals, violent gangs, and domestic and international arms traffickers. The Violent Crime Impact Teams they lead focus on hot spots of violent activity and work to ensure that violent criminals are arrested, prosecuted and incarcerated so that they can no longer terrorize the communities where they operate.

The DEA enforces federal drug laws, including production, sales and trafficking, and their enforcement efforts have brought down similar narcotics traffickers and their organizations.

DEA is also focused on working with local and state authorities to hit drug-trafficking organizations where it hurts them the most -- their pocketbooks -- and has been responsible for seizing almost \$590 million in cash and assets during the first half of this fiscal year.

And the U.S. Marshals Service has achieved great success with their Operation Falcon Initiative, large-scale fugitive sweeps that just last month in Baltimore netted 195 offenders for crimes ranging from murder and robbery to sex crimes and narcotics offenses.

Each of these components have always worked with their state and local counterpart to prosecute violent crime, drug and gun violations. In fact, they work together better today than ever before, in part thanks to the emphasis on collaboration and law enforcement post-September 11, 2001. At the department we understand the importance of providing resources to ensure that our state and local counterparts can join us in these efforts. That's why the department's 2008 budget request includes \$200 million to support locally led, multi-jurisdictional task forces. And I'll get back to that in just a moment.

In short, the department continues to be part of a strong national network of law enforcement programs that fight crime, and prevention programs that strive to keep them from happening in the first place. We are mindful that department investigators and prosecutors do not outrank or outnumber the local and state counterparts. And so out of respect for the role of local and state

law enforcement, we will instead seek to provide support and fill in the gaps, helping to multiply their resources.

Before I share our new efforts with you, I'd like to back up just a little bit to tell you about how the Initiative for Safer Communities began. Last winter I directed that Department of Justice officials visit 18 metropolitan areas scattered across the country to talk with state and local law enforcement and others in the community. Many of the jurisdictions that we visited had experienced increases in homicide or robbery rates, while others had experienced decreases. Our teams met with police chiefs and officers who are out working on the streets, sheriffs, corrections officials, district attorneys and community organizations working to prevent crime.

And what we learned is that every community faces unique challenges and problems.

What may be the top concern for the police chief in Columbus, Ohio may not be as significant an issue for the police chief in Hartford, Connecticut. Each city's solutions must therefore be tailored to its particular situation. And in many jurisdictions we visited, local law enforcement is already employing creative solutions tailored to their cities' particular needs.

Despite the very local nature of the crime problem, however, a few themes emerged from the Safer Communities visits. None of these was true in every city we visited, but these topics came up in one way or another in many of those places.

The first theme was the prevalence of violence committed by loosely organized street crews or local gangs. These are not gangs as we might traditionally think of them, with a structured hierarchy imposing discipline and ordering acts of violence. Rather, in many cases, the biggest concern for law enforcement is loosely organized local gangs or street crews who exist for a variety of criminal purposes, including self-protection, drug trafficking or organized robbery. They commit random violence without any discipline, and they're more difficult to investigate because of their lack of an organized structure.

Now that's not to say that large-scale, national gangs are not a concern. They are. But the number of observed street gangs, and the increasing violence they perpetrate, is a serious issue for local law enforcement.

Second, we heard that the prevalence of guns in the hands of criminals is a problem in many jurisdictions. Crimes committed with guns, particularly those committed by juveniles, are a concern to local law enforcement. And criminals who arm themselves with guns present a significant threat, not only to the community but also to the brave men and women of law enforcement across this country who seek to bring those armed offenders to justice.

Prosecution for crimes committed with guns is a necessary part of a comprehensive violent crime reduction program. And it was encouraging to hear feedback that federal prosecutions for the misuse of firearms, through partnerships developed by our Project Safe

Neighborhoods initiative, are providing a significant deterrent. In the six years since PSN's inception, the department has prosecuted twice as many crimes involving guns as we prosecuted in the six years prior to PSN.

And statistics from last year tell us that over 90 percent of those offenders serve time in prison, where they are off the street and cannot continue their violent, criminal ways. And prosecuting the offender after a crime is committed is only part of the equation. We must also focus on how those criminals get those guns in the first place.

Firearms are obtained by criminals in a variety of ways. For example, one way is through a "straw purchase," where someone else purchases the gun and then transfers it to a criminal, the actual purchaser. These transactions are illegal today. Other criminals get their guns through burglarizing homes or firearms dealers. And in other cases, individuals who initially obtained their weapon legally trade it in exchange for drugs. The department is looking at those issues, and we believe that we can offer help, and I'll get to that momentarily.

The third message we heard time and time again from police chiefs was a concern about the level of violence among their cities' youth. Many law enforcement officials reported that offenders appear to be younger and younger and their crimes are becoming more and more violent in nature. There are deeply troubling indications that young offenders often lack respect for human life, and they fail to appreciate the consequences of their actions.

We also heard about the ineffectiveness of some states' juvenile justice laws at deterring youth crime. In some cases, the existing juvenile justice systems provide little, if any, real penalty for crime, even for repeat violent offenders.

Many police chiefs attributed the problem of violence among youth to a lack of positive influence in the lives of young people, including a lack of parental involvement and the negative influence of popular culture which glamorizes violence and gang membership.

Indeed, we believe that prevention is the real solution to crime among our youngest citizens. By law, the federal government has only a very limited role in prosecuting juvenile offenders; the vast majority of such crimes are prosecuted by the states. These are not issues that the department can fix through heightened enforcement or by using federal tools. Instead, we must focus on helping out communities that have plans and structures in place to work on prevention and offer positive alternatives to crime, violence and gang membership.

This approach is also exemplified by First Lady Laura Bush's initiative, Helping America's Youth, which emphasizes family, school and community efforts with the support of federal funding. The federal government can and should partner in these efforts, but federal resources will always pale in comparison to the effectiveness of early intervention and attention by parents, by mentors, teachers and clergy in the lives of children. No amount of resources or police

officers can substitute for these things.

Although many of these problems can only be truly solved through attention by state legislatures, city councils, state and local law enforcement agencies and the leadership of local officials, the department does have an important role to play in helping state and local governments to fight crime in their communities, and there is much that we already do.

For example, through Project Safe Neighborhoods, every federal judicial district has developed a case screening system to ensure that significant firearms criminals are prosecuted in the jurisdiction that can offer the most appropriate sentence. Often, it is the federal system, with its strong penalties, that serves as the right forum.

In addition to stiff sentences that are not available in some state systems, the federal system also often provides pretrial detention for offenders who are a danger to the community and, once incarcerated, provides for appropriate sentences without parole.

Many local law enforcement agencies and communities reported dissatisfaction with a lack of pretrial detention or adequate bonds in the state system, or that offenders are released without serving a significant portion of their sentence.

For these reasons among others, our United States Attorneys' Offices can have a significant impact on street-level crime by prosecuting the worst of the worst violent offenders on federal conspiracy, drug or gun charges.

These federal prosecutions can be highly effective against members of the loosely organized gangs that I mentioned earlier. And that is why in February of last year, I expanded the Project Safe Neighborhoods program to include new and enhanced anti-gang efforts. The expansion of the successful PSN program added the department's existing robust anti-gang enforcement and prevention commitment.

The department over the last six years has also taken illegal firearms trafficking seriously and has made significant headway in our fight against illegal diversion of guns.

We are proud of the partnerships with state and local law enforcement and our existing efforts to reduce violent crime, but I recognize that effort alone is likely of little solace to the good people living in communities that are still experiencing increases in violent crime. I'm committed to doing more to make our neighborhoods safer for this country's citizens, and today I am pleased to announce a number of new programs and efforts to address the issues identified by our state and local counterparts through the Initiative for Safer Communities.

These efforts can be broken down into three categories: one, new federal law enforcement efforts; two, assistance to state and local law enforcement; and three, requests to Congress to bolster our legal authorities and our budget for combating violent crime.

More specifically, in the area of new federal law enforcement

efforts, many federal agents and prosecutors throughout the country have effectively leveraged the assets of the federal system by concentrating their violent crime efforts on the most serious violent offenders in their jurisdictions. To enhance and support that strategy, I am directing all U.S. attorneys and department law enforcement components to collaborate even further with state and local law enforcement and prosecutors to identify violent crime cases best prosecuted in the federal system.

Often these cases will focus on the "worst of the worst" violent offenders in the community. Targeting these offenders will ensure that violent individuals who pose the most significant danger to our communities are met with the most effective and the most vigorous prosecutorial tools available.

To help with this effort, the department is in the process of hiring at least 70 prosecutors, enabling our U.S. Attorneys' Offices to increase their efforts to prosecute violent crime. The ATF, DEA, FBI, Bureau of Prisons and the Marshal Service will work with other federal, state and local law enforcement officials to implement an initiative that will combine the success of the FALCON initiative round-ups with proactive takedown operations coordinated by ATF, FBI, DEA, ICE and our national anti-gang task force, GangTECC. These integrated takedowns and fugitive sweeps will be executed in a minimum of six cities this year.

The Marshals Service will also conduct a Fugitive Safe Surrender program in at least three additional cities this calendar year. Fugitive Safe Surrender is a powerful new initiative that encourages persons wanted for felony or misdemeanor crimes to voluntarily surrender to the law in a neutral setting. The Marshals Service has recently conducted successful operations in Cleveland, Phoenix, and Indianapolis, resulting in the surrender of more than 2,600 individuals, including over 700 wanted for felony warrants.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco Firearms and Explosives will expand its "Don't Lie for the Other Guy" program, developed in partnership with the National Shooting Sports Foundation, to educate federal firearms licensees on how to detect and deter illegal "straw purchases," enhance our partnership with FFLs to prevent and deter these illegal purchases, and to educate the public that engaging in straw purchases is illegal under federal law.

ATF will also expand its successful Violent Crime Impact Team initiative, with existing funds, to include five additional cities in the next year. The program uses innovative technology, analytical investigative resources and an integrated state and local law enforcement strategy to identify, to disrupt, arrest and prosecute the most violent criminals in 25 cities currently.

An expansion to more cities will build the successes already achieved by this program. For example, more than 2,000 gang members, drug dealers, felons in possession of firearms and other criminals were arrested on local, state or federal charges through the VCIT initiative in fiscal year 2006.

This year, the FBI has established an additional seven Safe

Streets Task Forces, bringing the current total to 176, and will expand to at least two more sites in the coming months. These violent gang and violent crime Safe Streets Task Forces combine the efforts of over 800 FBI agents and 1,200 other federal, state and local officers to disrupt and dismantle violent gangs, and target serious violent criminals throughout the nation.

Now in addition to these enforcement efforts, we will also be providing additional resources and training to support our state and local partners, including over \$18 million in grant funds distributed across the country to support traditional PSN efforts to reduce and prevent the criminal misuse of firearms, approximately \$31 million in grants to support expanded PSN efforts to combat gang violence nationwide, \$2.5 million for each of four additional sites -- Indianapolis, Raleigh-Durham, Rochester and Oklahoma City -- to implement the department's comprehensive anti-gang initiative, which focuses resources on prevention, enforcement and prisoner re-entry.

The Department is making \$125 million available to state and local governments and law enforcement to prevent and control crime, and to support the administration of justice. A particular focus of this grant program is to support law enforcement task forces. Task forces made up of veteran local law enforcement, working with federal law enforcement, can speed relief to those communities experiencing an increase in violent crime.

The first-ever DOJ-sponsored Comprehensive Anti-Gang Training for state and local law enforcement is also being planned. It will combine the expertise of ATF, FBI, DEA, Marshals Service, Bureau of Prisons, as well as the Office of Justice Programs, our U.S. attorneys offices and the Criminal Division into a unified curriculum.

I'd like to wrap up with a call to Congress. The department's fiscal year 2008 budget request includes \$200 million for Violent Crime Reduction Partnership grants and over \$13 million for other violent-crime-related enhancements that will support our Project Safe Neighborhoods enforcement efforts, increase our ability to target

firearms traffickers and increase the prosecution of gangs and violent criminals.

I hope Congress will approve that request.

We also looking forward to working with Congress on developing a new crime bill that will address some of the issues I've discussed today by amending and strengthening existing laws to ensure that federal law enforcement agencies are able to successfully investigate and prosecute many types of violent crime.

In conclusion, I want to say that the department is a proud player in the partnership to fight violent crime because we know fear -- we know how fear and violence can be the most unfair roadblock on the path of a child's dreams. And in the most free nation on Earth, a place where opportunities can be realized like no where else, we must not allow violent criminals to stand in the way of those dreams.

With the resources and tools that I've outlined here today, the

department will stand side-by-side with local and state law enforcement who are fighting for the safety of our neighborhoods every day. And we'll also be standing in support of the partners who I believe may be most important of all -- the ones at the community centers, the synagogues, churches and mosques, and the kitchen tables of the homes in any given neighborhood, who are facing their own unique challenge.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you very much. We have a lot of questions -- some of them about crime, some of them about other issues. And we'll start with this:

Lawmakers and local police have complained that the rise in violent crime is largely the result of the Bush administration's decision to reduce funding for state and local police programs, while boosting money for homeland security. Is there any justification for that criticism, and does that strategy need to be re-evaluated?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: You know, I think everything that we do is evaluated and re-evaluated, so the fact that we -- there's a question about re-evaluation of what we're doing is not a surprising one. Of course we re-evaluate. We always look very carefully at all our strategies in fighting crime and in fighting the war on terror.

Obviously after the attacks of 9/11, the number one priority for the department became ensuring the safety of our country from attacks

from terrorism, and of course, we did -- the Congress did create the Department of Homeland Security. And the key is to look at the total resources being made available to state and local governments from the Department of Justice as well as Homeland Security, and I think you'll find that we are providing a tremendous amount of support and resources for our state and local partners.

Do they want more resources? Of course they do, and that's something that we deal with every day, in terms of trying to find ways that we can make additional resources available, trying to find ways that we can partner up more effectively and more efficiently with our state and local partners. We ask a lot of our state and local partners, and obviously, I'm committed doing whatever I can to ensure that they have the resources that they need to be effective partners.

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you think that undocumented immigrants have contributed to the rise in crime rates in some communities?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: I think that it's true with respect to some communities. Certain gangs, certain street crews are composed predominantly of people that are here unlawfully, but there are many people here unlawfully who have also made tremendous contributions to our country. But clearly -- and I think if you talk to state and local officials around the country, you will hear some who will express concern about the fact that many of the gang members, for example, are comprised of people that are here unlawfully.

MR. ZREMSKI: Has the controversy over the U.S. attorneys

distracted you and taken time away that should have been spent fighting crime and terrorism?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: I think it would be disingenuous to say it hasn't been a distraction. It obviously has been. It's been an unfortunate episode, as far as I'm concerned, for the department. Obviously, I'm committed to working with the Congress to make information available about what happened here. We've been, in my judgment, extremely cooperative and forthcoming in turning over documentation and making department employees available for testimony. And I want to reassure the American public that nothing improper happened here.

In terms of specifically responding to your question, you know, we've got to do that but we have also -- have to remain focused on doing the job the American people expect. I think the American people really are concerned is the country safe from terrorism, are our neighborhoods safe from violent crime and gangs, are our children safe from predators and pedophiles. And so while, of course, I'm focused on ensuring that the Congress has the information that it needs to do its job, I'm also -- remain very, very focused, as are members of the department of Justice, remain very focused on doing the work for the American people.

MR. ZREMSKI: Deputy Attorney General Paul McNulty announced his resignation yesterday. Did the controversy over the fired U.S. attorneys strain your relations with him in any way? And do you have any concerns about top-level operations at the Justice Department, given that so many of your top aides have resigned recently?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Well, obviously, Paul's departure is a loss. I think he did a really good job as the deputy attorney general. We're getting to that point in time in any administration where you're going to suffer departures, people leaving. And so that's not unusual for any administration during this time, this point in time of the term of an administration, you know.

And obviously, the deputy attorney general has a unique position at the Department of Justice. Most of the operational authority and decisions are made by the deputy attorney general. He is the chief operating officer. That's the way that I've structured the department. And so he occupies a very central place in the work of the department.

And I have an obligation, and the president will, of course, be very, very interested in this, in terms of who that person's going to be. And we want to make sure we get the right person, and I'm sure

that we will. It's a unique opportunity to serve the American people, and it's an important position.

As I indicated in my statement yesterday about Paul's departure, I wish him well.

I think he's done a very, very good job, and I'm really going to miss him.

MR. ZREMSKI: You mentioned the desire to be forthcoming with information. The Democrats in Congress are demanding that the administration release additional e-mails that may shed some light on this situation, and they're saying they won't confirm any top nominees for positions in your department without the release of those e-mails first. Could this lead to a situation where, in effect, the department has trouble functioning because you don't have those top officials in place?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: We will continue doing the job for the American people, I'm quite confident of that. We -- you know, there are 110,000 employees at the department, and there are something like 400 political appointees; the rest are career. And so the fact -- I mean, this great institution is meant to withstand departures and changes in the leadership positions, because most of the great work is a result of the -- I mean, it's -- most of the accomplishments of the department is a result of the great work of career officials. And so the work of the department will continue. Obviously, I will work as hard as I can to ensure that the leadership positions are filled. I think -- I mean, I think that that's something that I have an obligation to pursue, and I'm going to be pursuing that, working with the Congress to get good people in place, working with the Congress to try to reach an accommodation with respect to the request for documentations.

Again, at the end of the day, there are institutional interests here on both sides -- institutional interests of the Congress, institutional interests of the executive branch, and somehow we've got to find an accommodation of those two competing interests.

MR. ZREMSKI: At last week's congressional hearing, you said that the Justice Department's senior leadership issued a consensus recommendation as to which U.S. attorneys should be terminated. By "senior leadership," who specifically did you mean? Who were the individuals who came to you?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Well, Mr. Sampson provided the recommendations. The one person that I would care about would be the views of the deputy attorney general, because the deputy attorney general is the direct supervisor of the United States attorneys. And in this particular case, Mr. McNulty was a former colleague of all of these United States attorneys, and so he would probably know better than anyone else about the performance and the qualifications of these -- of our United States attorney community.

And so at the end of the day, my understanding was that Mr. Sampson's recommendations reflected a consensus view of the senior leadership of the department, in particular the deputy attorney general. And the day of Mr. Sampson's testimony, I had a conversation with the deputy attorney general, as I testified, when I went back to the deputy attorney general and I asked Paul, "Do you still stand by the recommendations?" And he said, "Yes." And so -- I mean, for me, that's the most important -- those -- his views would be the most important.

MR. ZREMSKI: At that point in time, were you aware of any White

House involvement in the recommendations?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Well, of course I knew that -- I knew that there were conversations with the White House, but it's my understanding that the White House was -- never added or deleted names from any list that Mr. Sampson kept.

And I believe the White House has publicly stated that, that they were not involved in adding names or deleting names from the list.

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you believe that U.S. attorneys should be totally nonpartisan?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Well, listen, I think that with respect to -- U.S. attorneys, like the attorney general, kind of wear two hats. They have the prosecutorial hat. There they should be nonpartisan. They should make decisions about prosecutions based on the evidence, and not whether or not the target is a Republican or Democrat.

But like the attorney general, U.S. attorneys serve on the president's team. They're nominated by the president, and they are expected to support the president's priorities and policies with respect to criminal justice. And the president campaigns on a set of policies and priorities. The American people elect the president. And the only way the president can effectuate those policies and priorities in the law enforcement arena is through the attorney general and through his U.S. attorneys. And so we have an obligation, as political appointees, to support the president's policies and priorities.

But with respect to law enforcement decisions, there we should be totally nonpartisan.

MR. ZREMSKI: The administration's desire to bring more voting fraud cases and its unhappiness with U.S. attorneys who didn't seem to be a driving force behind the dismissals -- be a driving force behind voter fraud cases seems to have led to a number of these dismissals. Was there a concerted campaign led by the White House to bring more voter fraud cases? And to what extent did it factor into the firings? And to what extent could that be seen as partisan?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: No, there was no -- there was -- I'm not aware of any concentrated effort by the White House to promote a voter fraud prosecution campaign.

There were concerns raised by -- Mr. Rove, for example, raised with me concerns about voter fraud prosecutions in three jurisdictions.

But we have to remember voter fraud is a bad thing. It's against the law. We have an obligation to pursue it where it exists.

Now, in my judgment, it needs to be done in a way that doesn't chill or discourage voter participation on Election Day, and we have guidance with respect to that. But again, voter fraud is stealing. It is stealing votes. It is cancelling out legitimate votes. It's against the law, and we have an obligation to pursue it. And like we

pursue other crimes, we did so in this case.

MR. ZREMSKI: Former Deputy Attorney General James Comey recently testified that if politics were influencing the hiring of assistant U.S. attorneys, quote, "I don't know that there's any window you can go to to get the department's reputation back."

Do you agree with Mr. Comey? And if you do, what have you done personally to ensure that the hiring of assistant U.S. attorneys is strictly non-partisan?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: I don't agree. I think -- listen, mistakes happen at any organization, any company. That's why you have an Office of the Inspector General, quite frankly -- was created in the 1980s; the Office of Professional Responsibility in the department, created in the 1970s -- is because sometimes mistakes happen.

This is a great institution that always recovers from those mistakes. To the extent that, you know, we need to work on rebuilding confidence, you do it systematically. You do it day by day, through good works conducted by good people in the department. That's how you do it. And that's how it's been done in the past, and that's how it will be redone -- done again in this particular case.

And I think that with respect to politicization of the hiring of assistant United States attorneys, that's something that's very troubling to me, and that's why there was a referral made to the Office of Professional Responsibility and the Office of the Inspector General, with respect to those very, very serious allegations. And that's one way we address the problem.

The other way is bringing a new head of the Executive Office for United States Attorneys. We brought in a career prosecutor who is very, very well-respected in the community. And I think he will do a very good job and restore total confidence and trust in that office.

MR. ZREMSKI: It seems clear that two relatively inexperienced Justice Department political appointees, Kyle Sampson and Monica Goodling, were intimately involved in these seriously personnel issues.

Why were such young and inexperienced people put in charge of such matters?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Well, again, you have to remember, at the end of the day, the recommendation reflected the views of the deputy attorney general. He signed off on the names, and he would know better than anyone else -- anyone in this room, anyone -- I mean, again, the deputy attorney general would know best about the qualifications and experiences of the United States attorney community, and he signed off on the names.

MR. ZREMSKI: You mentioned that the hiring of a new executive -- a new head of the Office of U.S. Attorneys would be part of the effort to kind of rebuild confidence here. It seems like the previous head of that office, Michael Battle, really had a relatively minimal role in this decision-making process. He called the U.S. attorneys up and

told them that they should resign. But if you look at the e-mail chain, Monica Goodling, various others, Kyle Sampson were obviously much more involved in the decisions

Why was that? Why was the head of the Office of U.S. Attorneys not the key person in this whole case?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Well, they wouldn't be the key person in any event. Again, Mike would have the benefit of having been a former colleague, and so he would have some knowledge about the qualifications and performance of certainly these individuals. But again, as head of the Executive Office of United States Attorneys, his primary role would be to support the work of United States attorneys and not really to evaluate them or to supervise the work of the United States attorneys. That role was in the hands of -- I mean, that role belonged to the deputy attorney general.

MR. ZREMSKI: Why were you not more personally involved in these important personnel matters?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: I've already indicated that I should have been, and I've talked about ways of moving forward that would ensure that something like this doesn't happen again.

I think I was justified in relying upon the senior leadership in making these kinds of recommendations to me, but clearly in hindsight there are things that I would do differently.

MR. ZREMSKI: Why were you not more involved? Were you distracted by other issues that you have to deal with as attorney general?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Again, I should have been more involved in this, and going forward I will be more involved.

MR. ZREMSKI: Yes, but why were you not more involved?
(Scattered laughter.)

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Well, you know, there are lots of responsibilities and duties for the attorney general. I was questioned about why -- you know, "Why can't you remember the meeting that occurred on November 27th?" And I think this was in response to Senator Sessions in a hearing. And I told him, well, you have to -- that week -- I went back and looked at my calendar -- we were working on a very complicated foreign investment matter, I traveled to Mexico for the inauguration of the new president, and I mean there are a number of duties and responsibilities that the attorney general is responsible for. But nonetheless, I should have been more involved. And I've said that and we've taken steps to ensure that if this happens again we'll have a better process.

MR. ZREMSKI: Could you just elaborate on some of the changes you've made, perhaps in your own management style, to try to do things differently next time?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Well, let me just say this. I've been asked, "What would you have done differently?" I think I would have

had the deputy attorney general more involved formally in the process as an initial matter, maybe have him do the -- run the process as opposed to through the chief of staff.

I would have sat down with the chief of staff and told him, "I want this done in six months" instead of two years. I probably would have said, "Here's who I want you to consult with. Here's the -- here's the people that I want the recommendation to come from. These are the things specifically that I want you to consider. I want you to sit down with every United States attorney, have a face-to-face meeting and express to them whatever concerns that we've heard and

hear from them what their reaction and response is." And so I would have had a more structured process, a more vigorous process.

But one thing that I want to emphasize, and I've emphasized over and over again, I would have not had a more formal process, because United States attorneys do not want a formal evaluation process. They don't want it. To a person I've talked to, they don't want that because they want to report to the attorney general, they want to report to the deputy attorney general. If we have a more formal evaluation process, they will feel, as they've told me, they will be reporting to the evaluators.

The other issue I have with a formal process is that I think it's contrary to the notion that the president of the United States gets to decide who serves as United States attorney. If you have a more formal process and a U.S. attorney gets a great evaluation, politically it may be more difficult for the president to make a change simply because he wants to make a change. A president should be able to do that.

And so for those reasons, I wouldn't support a more formal process, but I certainly believe there should have been a more structured and a more vigorous process.

MR. ZREMSKI: What are you doing to regain the trust of U.S. attorneys and career DOJ lawyers in the wake of the controversy?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Well, in early weeks of March I was on the phone with all the United States attorneys and we had a very candid conversation about where things stood.

And then since then, I probably have met personally probably with over 80 United States attorneys in regional meetings. I know where I've sat down -- I spent about an hour and a half, two hours with groups of United States attorneys in talking about what has happened. We've had some very candid and very frank discussions, obviously. I think as a result of those discussions, we'll be able to make improvements about moving forward, about the relationships between the United States attorneys and me and Justice.

There never has been very good communication between the United States attorney community and me and Justice, and so we're going to look at ways that we can try to improve that. And so, you know, what I've done is reached out to them personally. I'm actually going to San Antonio today to meet with all of them and have good discussions

with them further. So again, what I'm doing is outreaching to them, communicating with them, making sure that I understand what their concerns are.

MR. ZREMSKI: How are you planning on working effectively with members of Congress over the next 20 months, when so many members think you should not be attorney general?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: You know, I don't -- well, what I will do is continue to work with Congress, as I always have in the past in terms of providing information that we can. The needs of this country are, quite frankly, too great. I mean, there are things that the department needs from Congress, and I will not be shy in going to Congress and saying, we need these things to protect our kids, we need these things to protect our neighborhoods, we need these things to protect our country. And if Congress doesn't want to give me those resources, that'll be a decision for Congress to make. But I'm not going to be bashful. I'm not going to be timid in going to Congress and pursuing what I think is absolutely necessary and right for the American people.

MR. ZREMSKI: Most of your top aides have resigned, many of them because of the mishandling of the U.S. attorneys situation. You've taken responsibility for all of this, but that being the case, shouldn't you also resign as the person in charge?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: I wouldn't -- you've said this a couple of times, "most of my top aides" -- I mean, obviously -- clearly, the loss of the deputy attorney general is a significant loss. But, you know, then you have Kyle Sampson, my chief of staff, and we now have

an acting chief of staff, we now have a new acting White House liaison, and I wouldn't characterize those as "top aides." I guess the other person you may be referring to is Mike Battle, the head of the Executive Office of United States Attorneys -- he was planning on leaving well before any of this became an issue, and we now have a very strong career person in there. So the department -- the work of the department continues and will continue.

And as to whether or not -- you know, my resignation would be appropriate, at the end of the day, that really is a question for the president of the United States. I make decisions about the people that work for me, the president makes the decisions about the people that work for him. He has to make that call.

MR. ZREMSKI: You testified that Paul McNulty was surprised and angered by the August 31 letter on the LInX from John McKay.

McKay has said publicly that he and U.S. Attorney Yang consulted with McNulty the day before the letter was sent to McNulty. Was your testimony wrong? And were you misled by McNulty?

McKay has e-mails on this.

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: I stand by what I said.

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay, a couple questions on some different topics.

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Good. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: (Laughs.) Well, we'll see. (Laughs.)

As White House counsel, you wrote a memo criticizing the Geneva Conventions, saying the war on terror, quote, "renders obsolete Geneva's strict limitations on questioning of enemy prisoners and renders quaint some of its provisions." Do you still feel that way in wake of Abu Ghraib and other incidents involving abuse of U.S. detainees? And do you think that the tone that your memo set means that you bear any personal responsibility for the abuses?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: There were multiple questions there.

No. I mean, yes, I still stand by the belief that -- I think it is appropriate to really ask ourselves: Do all the requirements of the Geneva Conventions, all the provisions make sense against this new kind of enemy that doesn't fight according to the laws of war?

And this is -- I think the council -- there was a committee of the British government that visited Guantanamo a few months ago. And what they found was actually, I thought -- was good for the American government, but what they said was even better in terms -- they themselves raised questions about rethinking Geneva. And there have been others in other foreign governments who have also raised questions about the need to look at the Geneva Convention, not backing away from our commitment to the protection of basic human rights and basic human values, but is it still the right paradigm, the right protocol, the right framework to deal with in a new kind of war, 50 years after when the Geneva Conventions were drafted.

So I think having this kind of discussion is a good thing. I think it's smart. I think it's wise. I don't think we should bury our heads in the sand and just say, "Well, you know, that's absolutely sacred and should never be revisited, reevaluated."

In terms of the abuses that happened, we have to remember that 99.9 percent of our men and women in uniform perform admirably, honorably. They understand where the lines are, and they don't cross the lines.

In some cases, people cross the lines, and that's what happened at Abu Ghraib. And you have to remember this was -- there was no general misunderstanding of what the laws were or what the rules were.

This was a group of individuals in one cell block, one night shift, at Abu Ghraib who engaged in this kind of conduct. No one else who was working there in the military -- the day shift, other cell blocks -- they didn't have any misunderstanding of what the rules of the road were. And so clearly it was unfortunate, and clearly it was a black eye for the American government. But the difference between our government and others is that when there are allegations of wrongdoing, we investigate them, and when we find that in fact wrongdoing has occurred, people are held accountable.

MR. ZREMSKI: Okay, we're almost out of time, but I just wanted

to mention one thing before I ask the last question. Please remain in your seats once we're done because the attorney general has to get to another engagement rather quickly, so if you could just hold tight for a moment or two once we're done.

Next, our presentation of our plaque and our mug. (Laughter.) You've got two of them now.

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Great. Thank you.

MR. ZREMSKI: Sure.

And finally our last question. Your critics say that your tenure shows the problems that result from having an attorney general who is too close to the president. But are there advantages to having an AG who is close to the president and what are they?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Did my staff write this question? (Laughter.)

STAFF: No.

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: I think it's an advantage. I think to be close to the president is a good thing. I think to be able to walk into the Oval Office and tell the president "no" and not worry about it -- how it's going to affect your future or your job -- is a good thing. I think you want that in a Cabinet official, and I hope that's true for any Cabinet official, whether or not they have a personal relationship with the president. But I think having the personal relationship with the president, quite frankly, is not a bad thing.

I think it can be a very good thing because, first of all, you have a pretty good idea of what's important for the president in terms of establishing policy and priorities, you really do. And so when I hear back, when Rachel Brand comes to me and says, "Well, the White House has a problem with that policy," my first question always my question I ask, "Well, who at the White House is it?," because sometimes it may be some low-level staffer who's maybe never even met the president.

And so I think knowing the president is a good thing; knowing what's important to him is good. And again, being able to go and having a very candid conversation and telling the president, "Mr. President, this cannot be done. You can't do this," I think you want that, and I think having a personal relationship makes that, quite frankly, much easier always to deliver bad news.

MR. ZREMSKI: Do you recall a time when you in there and said, "Mr. President, we can't do this?"

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Oh, yeah.

MR. ZREMSKI: Can you share it with us?

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: No. (Laughter.)

MR. ZREMSKI: (Laughs.) And with that, we're adjourned. Thank you all very much. (Sounds gavel.) (Applause.)

ATTY GEN. GONZALES: Thank you.

MR. ZREMSKI: Thank you. Appreciate it.

####

END