



Hemispheric Cooperation In Combating Terrorism, Defense Ministerial of the Americas III

Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen, Cartagena, Colombia, Tuesday, December 1, 1998

Thank you very much, Mr. President [Pastrana, of Colombia]. Yesterday I tried to indicate that my past experience in the Senate lends itself to long and rather windy speeches. But since assuming this position I've tried to compress my remarks to make them as short and as insightful as possible. Here this morning I would like to try to be as brief as I can and to summarize the issues dealing with terrorism.

Let me say once again what an honor it is for me to attend my first Ministerial as Secretary of Defense. I would also like to express my thanks once again to President Pastrana and the Colombian Government for hosting this Defense Ministerial.

This morning it occurred to me there is a line in "Alice in Wonderland" in which Alice is talking to the Cheshire Cat and she asks the cat 'Which way do I go to get from here to there?' And the cat responds 'it all depends on where you want to get to.' And Alice said 'I don't much care where.' And the cat responded 'Then it doesn't really matter which way you go.' In my study of the defense ministerials I believe that we have decided that we know exactly which way we want to go and where we want to go.

(Inaudible) ... it's historic in its scope to have a hemisphere that is very nearly democratic throughout. I would like to discuss this morning the role of the military in our lives and two subject matters which are of paramount interest. Yesterday there was a good deal of discussion about the nature of terror in our lives: the terror that is inflicted by nature and the terror that is inflicted by terrorists. Terror inflicted by the unbridled forces of nature and those inflicted by the unprincipled forces of evil -- these are the two types of terrorism which we have to confront in our daily lives.

The role of the military is that military capabilities are indispensable in fighting both. We will find that the very same capabilities that allow us to fight the war against terrorism will also allow us to fight the war against nature's terror. Key to that of course is preparation. I think it was Paderewski who said that genius is 90% perspiration and 10% inspiration. The same is true as far as our military capabilities are concerned.

The conference on Central American Armies of 1997 had the foresight to conduct a joint natural disaster response exercise this past June, and it was building upon the results of the hurricane relief exercise that was jointly conducted in February in Guatemala. I believe that that preparation resulted in the saving of hundreds if not thousands of lives and once again it demonstrates the need to have constant preparation.

With respect to the role of the military: the qualities of the military I think we are all familiar with. Our military personnel train under duress. They have clear command and control lines. They are highly disciplined. They are expert in operational planning and logistics. The challenge is how do you mesh that with the objectives of non-military mission or civilian types of missions.

There's no one rule. There is no one size that fits all. A plan that might work for the United States doesn't necessarily work for another country. Each of us have different histories, cultures and attitudes toward our military. In the United States for example, our military generally is for external types of national security concerns. We have a National Guard that deals with domestic issues. So we have our own history and culture to deal with regarding how we handle the military in its relationship to domestic issues. So each country will have to decide for itself and there's a good deal of trial and error and a good deal of compromise and accommodation as we work our way through in terms of what the role of the military is in our respective societies.

The assets that our military has will be important in dealing with natural disasters. I can assure you that notwithstanding the structure in which the civilian community as such [acts], whether we have a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) which is really designed to handle domestic types or emergencies, or whether we have a National Guard, or whether you have the local police or the fire department, you have all of these local agencies.

But when you have a tremendous disaster, what is the first thing that they turn to? It's the military. Whether it's the National Guard or whether it's the armed forces, it's the military that is called in because it has the most assets. The assets would include transportation, communication, engineering, medical. These are all indispensable to responding to natural disasters.

They are also the same assets which are indispensable in responding to acts of terrorism. [Terrorists] rejoice in the agony of their victims and then they hide in villages behind innocent people and the laughter of children and dare you to strike back. So all of us have had the experience whether it be in Buenos Aires or in Oklahoma City. We understand what happens when terrorists set off their bombs and inflict that kind of catastrophic damage.

It's likely to increase. Even though the reporting would indicate that acts of terrorism are actually decreasing, the level of lethality is on the rise. And that is especially true when it comes to dealing with chemical and biological weapons. That is the threat that all of us are likely to face in the future. And whether we're talking about a drop of VX, one drop of which can kill you in a matter of a couple of minutes, or anthrax, which a single spore inhaled in your lungs will kill you in a matter of few days, or whether we're talking about sarin gas released in a Tokyo subway or New York City or anywhere in the Americas.

Those are the dangers that we face today and tomorrow, the very same assets that are essential for

dealing with natural disasters are called into play very quickly in dealing with terrorism.

I think one of the most foreboding thoughts for me is how we talk about transnational terrorism. I look at my good friend, Minister Dominguez from Argentina. I said, "Well, suppose you had a small amount of bacterial agent released on the plane leaving Buenos Aires. It stops in Los Angeles or San Francisco on its way to Toronto. Then on to Amsterdam or London or wherever. Suddenly you have that one plane that has been infected and those people on that plane were now stopping off in Los Angeles, all the way across to Europe. No one knows that they're infected in the first instance. The disease has spread and you have no idea who has caused it."

So the question of deterrence becomes very relevant. How do you deter such acts of terrorism? One thing that has been done is that the OAS [Organization of American States] created the Inter-American Commission on Terrorism. I think that's very important because terrorists see that there is international cooperation, that in itself is going to have a deterrent effect.

But when we talk about deterring terrorists, it requires a number of things. It requires first of all having preparation. We have to prepare for a disaster which is predictable. And so we have to number one understand that if there is an act of terrorism involving a chemical or biological agent, how do you identify it, how do you know what your population has just been hit with. So we have to look at the people who are the first responders: the police, the fireman, the doctors, the nurses, -- you send them off to the hospital and suddenly you might have an entire hospital infected. So what we have tried to do in our country is to try to train the responders. We have to start training the people who are going to be called upon to respond first to these acts of terrorism. We are calling upon our National Guard in fact to help in that reconciliation of jurisdictions.

One of the problems we're going to continue to see is who is in charge. When you have an act of terrorism, who's in charge of it? Is it the local police? Is it the mayor? Is it the county? Is it the state government? Is it the federal government? You have all of these jurisdictional issues to work out. And that's what we are working our way through right now by trying to come to grips with setting up the jurisdictional lines.

And again, the military will play a key role because of the assets I mentioned. The fact that we have transportation and communications, that we have disciplined officers and soldiers who can carry out orders and react under very stressful circumstances, all of that will be terribly important in coming to grips with acts of terrorism in our respective countries.

So I think in addition to preparation the next most important thing that we can talk about is intelligence. How do we share intelligence? How do we collect intelligence? And we do we reconcile the collection of intelligence with the preservation of privacy? This is an issue which I think very few countries including the United States have come to grips with.

The best deterrent that we have against acts of terrorism is to find out who is conspiring, who has the material, where are they getting it, who are they talking to, what are their plans. In order to do that, in order to interdict the terrorists before they set off their weapon, you have to have that kind of intelligence-gathering capability, but it runs smack into Constitutional protections of privacy. And it's a tension which will continue to exist in every free society -- the reconciliation of the need for

liberty and the need for law and order.

And there's going to be a constant balance that we all have to engage in. Because once the bombs go off -- this is a personal view, this is not a governmental view of the United States, but it's my personal view -- that once these weapons start to be exploded people will say protect us. We're willing to give up some of our liberties and some of our freedoms, but you must protect us. And that is what will lead us into this 21st Century, this kind of Constitutional tension of how much protection can we provide and still preserve essential liberties.

And so that is a challenge that I think all of us have to address ourselves. What we need most of all is to have an understanding that we must share intelligence about terrorist activities. If you pick up information about groups that are planning attacks within your own countries who are cross-border, then that is information that should be shared. The same is true for all of us in the hemisphere. We have an obligation to do that and I believe that it will in fact provide the kind of deterrence that we are all looking for.

Mr. President, I had a prepared speech but I think I've covered most of the issues without making it too lengthy. But I do believe that the role of the military in fighting natural disasters, and also in fighting terrorism are very similar -- the training, the equipment, the expertise -- all of that needs to be integrated very fully in a well-thought-out plan so that we can combat these two threats to our societies.

We have seen in [Hurricane] Mitch and in other tragedies more recently – [Hurricane] Georges as well -- how nature can devastate everything that we have worked to establish. [It] can wipe out villages and the total infrastructure in a society. We will also see that it is possible through acts of terrorism, particularly in the field of weapons of mass destruction.

So we have an obligation to address ourselves with all of the intensity we can and with all the level of cooperation and openness and transparency that the Defense Ministerials are committed to.

Thank you very much.