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Prepared Remarks

“Guarding Liberty, Securing America’s Open Society”

The Summit Institute’s International Forum
New Directions: Managing the Canada/U.S. Relationship
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

December 5, 2003

Good morning and thank you for that warm welcome. I am pleased to be here representing the Bush Administration on an occasion as important as this conference- with an objective as important as ours- a more vibrant, productive and cooperative bilateral relationship between Canada and the United States.

Our close and extensive ties are our greatest resource, and the envy of the world. Each day, more than \$1 billion in goods, services and investment income cross our border. Each year, some 200 million people cross to work, shop and live.

The measure of a relationship, however, is not gauged during times of peace and prosperity, but rather when tested with adversity and uncertainty.

The war on terror proves that the sinews of the Canada-U.S. relationship are strong. Led by Deputy Prime Minister John Manley and then-Governor Tom Ridge, in December 2001, our countries pledged to a Smart Border Action Plan that enhances security while facilitating the legitimate flow of people and commerce.

We also prioritized risk management as key to protecting our 5,000-mile border, and more specifically our respective homelands.

Risk can be generally defined as the likelihood that some event might occur, coupled with negative ramifications if, or when, it does.

The management of risk implies an understanding that we cannot anticipate or mitigate everything, particularly risks inherent to legal and illegal immigration.

Canada and the United States, however, can be steadfast in our collective resolve. For our part, the Department of Homeland Security is leveraging ingenuity, technology and partnerships to guard liberty and secure America.

America's principles, like Canada's, are founded in freedom, democracy and certain unalienable rights. Our land is a beacon to those with dreams and determination...those tired, poor huddled masses yearning to breathe free...those immigrants in whose footsteps I followed...and those immigrants for whom I am now a gatekeeper, as the first Director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

My appointment is one of my life's greatest honors. I am entrusted with fundamentally transforming the delivery of immigration and citizenship services while enhancing the integrity of America's security.

Simply, we make certain that the right applicant receives the right benefit in the right amount of time and we prevent the wrong applicant from receiving our benefits.

Annually, we conduct 35 million background checks, on the front and back ends of processing every application. In the amount of time that it takes you or me to make a pot of coffee, we run a check and our adjudicators make a decision that impacts a life, often a family, and always a country.

Our national security check process is stronger today than ever before. The system is designed to prevent a decision from being made until USCIS is in receipt of a response from the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

This policy has resulted in court challenges against us, but we make no apologies and will not cut a single corner in protecting our homeland.

The dissolution of the Immigration and Naturalization Service and its reorganization within the Department of Homeland Security has established three distinct yet complimentary roles.

USCIS is exclusively dedicated to adjudications and services. And, though we are not a true enforcement entity, often our answer to an application for an immigration benefit is- no.

In instances when our databases, cross-referencing more than 20 law enforcement and intelligence systems, indicate that detention or removal is in order, we call upon our colleagues in ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement.) ICE is also vital in dismantling human smuggling and trafficking rings, disrupting fraud and identifying and arresting child predators.

The third component of the legacy INS, within DHS, is now referred to as CBP (U.S. Customs and Border Protection.) This includes what were the Border Patrol and U.S. Customs. They serve on the front lines and are the men and women in uniform that you see at the U.S. Ports of Entry.

With the Homeland Security Act of 2002, the Administration and Congress recognized the great need for delineation between immigration services and enforcement. Under the DHS umbrella, ICE, CBP and other enforcement components are part of the division of Border and Transportation Security, directed by Under Secretary Asa Hutchison.

I have the same direct reporting hierarchy to the Secretary, via the Deputy Secretary, as does my good friend Asa.

I mention this not to flaunt my authority or seniority, but rather to underscore America's profound commitment to legal immigration.

Within the bureau that I lead, an Office of Citizenship has been created to champion a nationwide rediscovery of this treasured value. Paralleling the Canadian immigrant and settlement programs, it will facilitate civic integration and educate legal immigrants about their responsibilities.

President Bush has tasked me with "welcoming immigrants with open arms, not endless lines." He understands better than anyone that America is a nation of immigrants, and that we are becoming even more so.

Since 9/11, applications for immigration benefits have continually risen. Each year, my signature proudly appears on about 640,000 certificates for naturalized citizenship.

That equates to the population of the State of North Dakota. And, that volume is up 5% from 2002, which itself was up 5% from the year prior.

Immigrants come for the American dream...for freedom...for opportunity. However, in a free society, there are always a small few who come with the wrong intentions.

There is risk that any traveler's identity, documents or intentions are not authentic or legitimate.

To help combat this threat, I recently announced the production of new, re-designed travel documents for permanent residents, refugees and asylees.

These travel documents are used for re-entry into the U.S., and take advantage of the latest state-of-the-art technology to disrupt and frustrate a counterfeiter's ability to duplicate. At the same time, improved production techniques and processes allow us to get these documents into the hands of our customers more quickly.

That is but one of many examples of how far USCIS has come. Since December 2001, our bilateral progress has been every bit as impressive.

Our countries have opened fast lanes at three of the busiest commercial ports of entry, and created bi-national work plans to protect critical infrastructure in the energy, telecommunications and transportation sectors.

Canada participated in TOPOFF 2, a major U.S. counter terrorism exercise involving all levels of government and first responders. In addition, Canada began issuing Permanent Resident Cards, one of the most fraud-resistant documents in the world.

Canada and the United States have also jointly engaged in cooperative science and technology research; established FAST to expedite the movement of low-risk shipments; and frozen the assets of individuals and organizations known to support terrorism.

And, in the area of immigration, we have committed to a Safe Third Country Agreement that, once implemented, will allow both nations to more effectively manage the flow of asylum seekers.

The Agreement is founded on the premise that States can appropriately limit the ability of an asylum seeker to choose a country of refuge, so long as that asylum seeker has a full and fair opportunity to present a claim for protection, and to receive asylum if he or she is a refugee.

The Safe Third Country Agreement applies to asylum seekers arriving at land border ports of entry and requires them to present their asylum claims to the country they are already in, rather than the country they are seeking to enter.

Based on our mutual, strong and long-standing commitment to family unity, the Agreement will allow individuals to cross the border to reunite with family members and seek asylum.

This robust “family unity exception” in the Agreement specifically exempts individuals who have certain family members in the receiving country.

The Agreement also ensures that all asylum seekers will be heard and that individuals will not be removed until a protection determination has been made by Canada or the United States.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada and USCIS have worked diligently to anticipate and resolve potential challenges related to implementation. We agreed to a fair and thorough statement of principles to ensure procedural safeguards.

This includes decision-making review and the opportunity for an asylum seeker to have an individual present when interviewed about exceptions to the Agreement.

I am certain, for many of my Canadian colleagues, the question remains- when will the regulations put forth by the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice be published?

The answer is- not until cleared by all the relevant offices within the Administration, including the Office of Management and Budget. Once published, we will offer a 60-day public comment period and follow with a final rule.

We are making every effort to implement the Agreement in the most efficient and coordinated manner possible.

Of course, our asylum programs will be more effective with comprehensive and timely information exchange on asylum seekers...an exchange that will ultimately include biometric data.

The February 2003 Statement of Mutual Understanding between CIC and USCIS, and its Asylum Annex, will serve to that end.

While adhering to our respective privacy laws, the Asylum Annex will allow us to systematically exchange information on individuals who seek asylum in both countries.

At the end of the day, what it means is a more proactive identification of potential security and criminal threats.

I am particularly impressed by the thoroughness with which both sides addressed the technical requirements of our information-sharing agreements. Our diligence has minimized vulnerabilities.

Last fiscal year, USCIS admitted approximately 28,000 refugees, and granted asylum status to 12,000 others. While under the congressionally mandated ceiling, there are more than 40,000 new American dreams well underway.

These are people who often fled their homes with nothing more than the clothes on their back. They proved a well-founded fear of persecution based upon their race, religion, nationality, social affiliation or political opinion.

One of the twentieth century's greatest leader's, Winston Churchill, is known for having frequently said, "Don't be content with things as they are."

I, and 15,000 USCIS employees, in 250 offices worldwide, are not content with things as they are.

We value our relationship with Canada. We remain committed to working with our counterparts in CIC to guard liberty and to secure the homelands of Canada and America.

I thank the Summit Institute for its gracious invitation and I thank each of you for your dedication to this very important bilateral relationship.

I am making the most of my time on this visit. I have an ambitious agenda, so I regret that I cannot stay too long.

However, before I go, I will be glad to answer a couple of questions.

Thank you again.

May God bless Canada, and may God continue to bless the United States of America.