

Remarks at the Attorney General's Crime Summit

March 5, 1991

Thank you so very much for that welcome, and I will say what I said at the State of the Union: I take that warm response as a vote of thanks to our fine young men and women who served this country with such distinction in the Gulf. What a job they did! And I think everybody was saying that.

Let me greet you, Mr. Attorney General, and thank you for the introduction and the invitation to be here. I want to salute the U.S. attorneys, the State AG's, the judges, the local DA's, the sheriffs, police, State and local officials—and then also, most especially, the community leaders from across America. It is an honor to welcome you to Washington. You represent one of the most powerful peacetime forces known to man. And that's why you've been invited to this unprecedented council of war—to share ideas and successes and to help frame the battle plan for the fight against violent crime and drugs for the next decade and beyond.

Dick was in a minute ago, briefing me on this conference that ends this afternoon, telling me with great pride the accomplishments and the enthusiasm that have been brought together here. And I'm here because I wanted you to know how strongly I feel about reducing violent crime in America and how firmly we support your efforts to fight crime and to give back our streets to America's families.

And against this backdrop, I know there's something else on everyone's mind—I heard it when I walked in—because soon your hometowns all across America will welcome home the finest fighting force ever assembled: the courageous men and women of the United States military.

And for 7 long months, America watched with a lump in our throat and a prayer on our lips. And now in Kuwait the fires of destruction are beginning to dim, eclipsed by the brilliant flame of freedom.

The coalition victory in the Gulf is a test to America's leadership and skill and to our nation's unparalleled ability to respond swiftly and successfully to a clearly stated

challenge. We had a challenge. We set a goal, and we achieved it.

These American heroes risked their lives so that America's kids could realize a dream—a world free from aggression and fear, a world filled with opportunity, a world whose only limits are in the reaches of the imagination.

And I told our troops the other day that, like the coming promise of spring, their magnificent victory in the Gulf had brought a renewed sense of pride and confidence here at home. It's contagious; it's all over our country, and you can feel it every single minute.

Our confidence in America's future is the foundation for the opportunity package we unveiled last week. It calls for improved opportunity through education, jobs, home ownership, and programs aimed at keeping families healthy and together. And it calls for safe schools, neighborhoods, and homes. Because now that the shooting has stopped overseas, we've got to redouble our efforts to silence the guns here at home. And that's why you're here. That's why you're here, and that is why I singled out this summit in my State of the Union Address—because here at home you are America's front-line troops. And here at home, the triumph of freedom has got to mean freedom from fear.

Today the fear of crime strikes too many American families. Parents fear for their kids in school and on the way home. They fear for their teenagers and the lessons they may learn in the streets. And they fear for their own parents, for whom a simple trip to the grocery may become an exercise in terror.

Perhaps you saw the report that during the first 3 days of the ground offensive more Americans were killed in some American cities than at the entire Kuwaiti front. Think of it—one of our brave National Guardsmen may have actually been safer in the midst of the largest armored offensive in history than he would have been on the streets of his own hometown. It's outra-

geous. It's wrong, and it's going to change.

The temptation is strong to use the words of a victorious war to send you back to your daily challenge. But wars serve us best when we learn from them, not glorify them. And among the lessons is that in furtherance of a widely accepted moral value, collective action succeeds. This is a simple but powerful message that applies to this summit today. And a second great message is that numbers alone are not determinative. More than simply sheer numbers, our victory was based on creativity, strategic thinking, and the skilled execution of a bold plan.

And you'll forgive an old Navy man if my message to you today is drawn from the lessons of America's great World War II admiral, William F. "Bull" Halsey. "Carry the battle to the enemy," he said. "Lay your ship alongside his." And on the eve of the battle of Santa Cruz, in which his ships were outnumbered more than 2 to 1, Halsey sent his task force commanders a three-word dispatch: "Attack—repeat—attack." And they did attack, heroically, and when the battle was done, the enemy had turned away.

Just look at what we've done in the Gulf—pilots, our missile men, the impressive logistics and diplomatic operations. America is a "can-do" nation. And today at home, we must seize the day. The kind of moral force and national will that freed Kuwait City from abuse can free America's cities from crime. As in the Gulf, our goal is to strengthen and preserve the rule of law. As in the Gulf, we need creative and strategic thinking to free our cities from crime. And as in the Gulf, this means assembling an unprecedented coalition. We've got to cooperate, really cooperate, on a level never before seen—Federal, State, and local prosecutors; Federal, State, and local police; Governors; mayors; and the new corps of neighborhood peacekeepers, the community leaders who have stood up to the violence and despair.

Our administration is committed to doing its part. I know Dick Thornburgh, our very able Attorney General, spoke with you about this yesterday. Under his leadership, we've taken the lead in fighting organized crime, drug trafficking, and the deadly tide of violence that follows in their wake. We've

made record increases in Federal prosecutors and agents. By 1992, we will be well on our way to more than doubling our Federal prison space, allowing us to use tough Federal laws to put violent offenders behind bars to stay. Asset forfeiture laws allow us to take the ill-gotten gains of drug kingpins and use them to put more cops on the streets and more prosecutors in court. In the last 5 years alone, the Justice Department shared over half a billion dollars in forfeited assets with State and local law enforcement.

We understand that fighting violent crime is first and foremost a State, local, and community responsibility. And that's why, since coming to this office, we have increased the amount of funding through the Edward Byrne Memorial Fund for State and local law enforcement by 220 percent. We are foursquare behind the police and people like those in this room who make sacrifices every day to protect our citizens and to assure that those who scorn justice are brought to justice.

Just look at the all-American heroes here today. There's always the risk when you single them out in a room like this, but people like L.A. police chief Daryl Gates, who stood with me on Foster Webster's front porch in Oakwood last May, looking out over a neighborhood where they reclaimed their streets, their kids, their future. Or South Carolina's Dean Kilpatrick, who we honored in the Rose Garden in April, and who's here to help build an America where every victim of every crime is treated with the dignity and the compassion they deserve. And Al Brooks, who in Kansas City a year ago showed me their four-word warning to the cowards of the night: "This neighborhood fights back."

I mentioned the Byrne Memorial Fund. And by the way, I still keep this policeman's badge in my Oval Office desk. It's there night and day. Shield 14072 belonged to patrolman Eddie Byrne. And he died on the front line—gunned down by cocaine cowards. I'll never forget—never, ever. And each one of you have an example that means something—of a friend lost or a comrade who's been killed by these cocaine

cowards.

Two years ago on a somber, rainy, spring-time afternoon, I stood before the U.S. Capitol to commemorate police officers slain in the line of duty. Many of you in this audience were there that day. And to honor their sacrifice, I called upon the Congress to join me in launching a new strategy—a new partnership with America’s cities and States to “take back the streets.”

Congress deserves our thanks for giving us the new prosecutors and agents we requested. But it’s not enough. We also need to back up these new troops with new laws and give them the tools they need to finish the job and secure the peace. America needs a crime bill that’s tough on criminals, not on law enforcement.

Too many times, in too many cases, too many criminals go free because the scales of justice are unfairly loaded against dedicated law men and women like you. But even after a year and a half, and despite the urgency of the problem, Congress never did act on our proposals. And that’s why we’re here again to work with you—to develop new proposals, to try to steady the scales of justice, to seek a fair balance between the legitimate rights of suspects and society’s right to protect itself.

We need a crime bill that will stop the endless, frivolous appeals that clog our habeas corpus system. One that guarantees that criminals who use serious weapons face serious time, and one that ensures that evidence gathered by good cops acting in good faith is not barred by technicalities that let bad people go free. And for the most heinous of crimes, we need a workable death penalty—which is to say, a real death penalty.

As Dick has told you, we need your ideas in putting together our new crime package. And we’ll need your help in getting it through Congress. But I promise you this: We’re not giving up on this crime bill. We’re not going to let it get watered down. And we’re not going to put our crime fight-

ers in harm’s way without backing them to the hilt.

And there’s another important message I would ask you to bring home to your cities and States: Your troops in State and local law enforcement need the same tools that we’ve proposed for the Feds—mandatory time for weapons offenders; no plea-bargaining on guns; the death penalty for heinous crimes; and the kind of increased resources—in police, prosecutors, and prisons—that ensure these vicious thugs will be caught, prosecuted, and swiftly punished. Because public safety is not just another line item in a city or State budget—it is the first duty of any government.

Yes, there remain vital tests ahead, both here and abroad, but nothing the American people can’t handle. So, we’re going to roll up our sleeves, raise up the flag, and stand up for the decent men, women, and children of this great country—block by block, day by day, school by school—for your kids, for mine, for America’s kids. Take back the streets and liberate our neighborhoods from the tyranny of fear—that is our objective, and we will succeed.

Thank you all for coming. I really wanted to thank you all for coming and for all you do to protect the people of this great nation. Thank you all, and may God bless the United States. Thank you very much.

Note: The President spoke at 2:18 p.m. in the ballroom at the Sheraton Washington Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Attorney General Dick Thornburgh; Daryl F. Gates, chief of the Los Angeles, CA, Police Department; Foster Webster, chairman of the Oakwood Beautification Committee; Dean G. Kilpatrick, 1990 recipient of a Department of Justice award for outstanding public service on behalf of victims of crime; Alvin L. Brooks, executive director and founder of the Ad Hoc Group Against Crime; and Edward Byrne, slain New York City policeman.