

Exchange With Reporters in Thousand Oaks, California August 15, 2003

Q. Do you have time for a couple of questions?

The President. Yes, I'll answer a couple of questions.

North American Power Blackout/Energy Legislation

Q. Can you update us on the situation back East, what you've heard, whether there's been any progress toward finding out what possibly caused the blackout?

The President. Yes, it's going to take a while, I think. But we will find out what caused the blackout, and we'll deal with it. I view it as a wake-up call. You know, I've been concerned that our infrastructure—the delivery system is old and antiquated. And I think this is an indication of the fact that we need to modernize the electricity grid.

So it's a good opportunity for us to analyze what went wrong and to deal with it. We don't know yet what went wrong, but we will.

Q. There's a bill pending in Congress, the energy bill, that's pretty broad in scope. There's also a piece of that bill that's smaller that would fix this particular problem. Would you urge Congress to act on that?

The President. Yes, I think what we need to do is take a look at what went wrong, analyze the problem, and come up with a solution. And I think it's very important—I'm going to say this down here in the remarks—the people in New York and in the Northeast and in parts of the Midwest were—showed the great character of America in very difficult circumstances. The people responded in calm fashion. They worked hard to help their neighbors in need, and they showed the rest of the country and the world the true mettle of the American people.

As I said yesterday, I'm most pleased by the fact that we've got a—our emer-

gency response was good. They acted well. And I doubt that would have happened—the response would have been this good—prior to September the 11th. But the creation of the Homeland Security Department, coupled with the modernization of communications between State and local and Federal officials, really enabled the system to work well. And now we've got to figure out how to make the electricity system have the redundancy necessary so that if there is an outage like there has been throughout our history, that it doesn't affect as many people as it did in the past.

Q. Sir, are you worried, though, that power still isn't restored to so many millions of people and may not be through the weekend?

The President. Well, I think, you know—listen, everybody is working hard to get it restored as quickly as possible. I think it's going to take a while to get 100 percent of the power up and running. And that's why it's important for our citizens who have got electricity in the Northeast and the Midwest would be wise about how they use the electricity. They must conserve, because the more conservation there is now, the more likely it is their neighbor is going to end up having electricity in a quicker fashion.

Q. In recent weeks, you have mentioned several times the need to pass your comprehensive energy plan. Is there anything in there that would have helped or mitigated this?

The President. Well, I think part of the plan recognizes that the grid needs to be modernized, the delivery systems need to be modernized. And obviously something like this isn't going to happen overnight. But it is—it begins to address the problem, that this particular incident has made abundantly clear to the American people that we've got an antiquated system, and now

we've got to figure out what went wrong and how to address it. And I'm confident we will.

Q. You said yesterday that while you've made some offers of Federal assistance, the States and locals didn't really seem to need much help; they had it under control. Is that still the situation?

The President. Actually, as I understand it, as of this morning, at about 5:30 a.m. Pacific Coast time, there was a request for a generator by New York City from the Department of Defense, which we're now working on delivering.

Look, for example, Tommy Thompson started calling around to hospitals and ask-

ing, did everybody get what they need? And Tom Ridge was calling, which made it clear—abundantly clear—that where we had assets that could help, we're more than willing to help. This is a national problem, and the Federal Government has got a responsibility to help local and State officials. As far as I know, the one specific request to date was this generator.

Thank you all.

NOTE: The exchange began at 8:35 a.m. at the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.

Remarks at the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area in Thousand Oaks, California

August 15, 2003

Thank you all for coming. This is a beautiful place to gather. It's a little different from Crawford—[laughter]—but the work is just as hard. If it looks like I'm kind of sweaty, it's because I am. [Laughter] I've been shoveling dirt to make sure the trails are maintained so people can use them.

Before I talk about our park system, I do want to say that the people of New York City and New York State and the people of the Northeast and Midwest who were affected by last night's blackout were—kept their calm, were decent to their neighbors, really showed the rest of the country and the world the true character of the American people. I want to thank all of them for how they dealt with a very difficult situation and assure them that Federal, State, and local authorities are working hard to get the power up and running to take care of the needs of the people. And at the same time, we'll figure out what went wrong, and we'll address it. We will view this rolling blackout as a wake-up call, a wake-up call for the need to

modernize our electricity delivery systems, and we'll respond.

And what we're here to talk about today is how do we make sure our national asset, the National Park System, has got a modern infrastructure system as well, so that the people who own the park, the American people, can use the parks. After all, the parks are owned by the people of this country, and we want the park system to work well, and we want there to be a modern infrastructure. We want the 80 million acres of national park land to be accessible and comfortable to use for the American people, and at the same time, we want to respect nature and honor God's great gift to our country by conserving these beautiful properties all across the country.

The responsibility to maintain our parks has not always been met in America. It's a problem that we will address, and helping me address the problem is the Secretary of the Interior, Gale Norton. You know, I picked somebody from the West to run the Interior Department because I felt like,