

Prepared Remarks of Attorney General John Ashcroft

January 17, 2002—U.S. Border Patrol-Native American Border Security Conference

Good morning. Let me begin by thanking Immigration and Naturalization Service Commissioner Ziglar for spearheading this conference. Commissioner Ziglar believes that greater cooperation with Native American Tribal leaders and law enforcement is an essential component of any comprehensive strategy to protect our borders and I wholeheartedly agree. I would also like to thank Gustavo de la Vina, Chief of the U.S. Border Patrol, for his outstanding work in a difficult job. And I want to say a special thanks and welcome to Washington to the leaders and law enforcement officials of the 19 Native American tribes here today. Thank you to all of you for being here for this important event.

The attacks of September 11 demonstrated in dramatic fashion the need to pay attention to all facets of our national security. Would-be terrorists, drug smugglers and other illegal migrants pose continuing threats to the health and safety of our nation and its people. Your presence here today demonstrates a clear recognition of the critical need for close cooperation and communication between the U.S. Border Patrol and law enforcement officials to protect our borders in Indian country. Although Border Patrol agents have been working with Native Americans ever since the Patrol was established more than 75 years ago, most of this cooperation has been on an ad hoc basis. This informal partnership has often been productive, but we must establish permanent formal relations in order to secure the safety and security of all Americans.

Securing our nation's borders is an immense task. The United States shares some 7,400 miles of patrolable international boundary with Canada and Mexico. More than 25 Indian tribes govern lands that are either adjacent to borders or directly accessible by boat from the border. These tribal lands encompass over 260 miles of international borders — a distance 100 miles longer than California's border with Mexico. Tens of thousands of illegal migrants cross these borders and disappear into the heart of our nation every year.

Along our southern border, for example, the Tohono O'odham [TOE-HOE-NO OTH-EM] Nation in Arizona shares a 75-mile boundary with Mexico. Traffic across the tribe's desert lands accounts for an estimated 700 to 1000 illegal entrants each day from Mexico.

Along our Northern Border, the Blackfeet Nation shares approximately 63 miles of border with Canada. These border lands are comprised of vast expanses and remote passes.

Potentially vulnerable points on our border demand our attention now more than ever. Indeed, as we succeed in protecting routine entry points along our borders, we may expect greater challenges in these remote areas, as persons who wish to enter illegally look for new places with lower visibility. Our homeland security remains threatened so long as any portion of our international border remains unprotected.

Local law enforcement agencies play a crucial role in securing our nation's borders, and tribal law enforcement agencies are no exception. You know your territories. You know your constituents and members. You know and understand local circumstances — how and where people illegally enter the United States, and what can be done to stop them. Your work brings you face-to-face with people who would otherwise escape the nation's security net.

This conference offers a unique opportunity to marry local, tribal expertise with federal expertise to enhance the security of our nation's borders. We have seen that as coordination increases, so does the security of our borders. Operation Northern Door in the Northern District of New York, and the Integrated Border Enforcement Teams are both models of cooperation in which federal law enforcement and tribes have been working together for years. In addition, ride-along programs, cross-cultural training, and youth outreach programs in

the Tucson and Swanton Sectors have fostered greater understanding between Border Patrol agents and their tribal counterparts. We must build upon these efforts throughout Indian country. When we do, we will find that we can achieve results.

Operation Over the Rainbow, for instance, was a multi-agency investigation that brought together U.S. and Canadian federal officials and tribal law enforcement. It targeted a smuggling operation that spanned five continents and earned an estimated \$170 million by smuggling as many as 150 Chinese nationals a month from Canada to New York through the St. Regis Mohawk Territory. Smugglers sought to exploit the fact that the United States, Canada, New York State, Ontario, Quebec and tribal governments all had some jurisdiction over the border territory they used. And for a time, they succeeded.

But when federal officials began to work together with each other and tribal governments, including the St. Regis Mohawk police, the smuggling operation was shut down. Operation Over the Rainbow culminated in the arrest of 45 alien smugglers responsible for operating the largest, most-complex smuggling ring every encountered on our northern border.

This is but one example of the dividends that can be reaped by investing the time and effort needed to build a productive partnership. Again, let me thank Commissioner Ziglar, Chief de la Vina, and all of you here today for demonstrating your commitment to such a partnership. The Federal government and Tribal law enforcement, working together, will continue to play a pivotal role in making our borders safe and secure. This conference is only the first step – but an important one. It marks the beginning of an ongoing process – a process that, in the end, will ensure a more secure America.