

SENIOR EXECUTIVES ASSOCIATION
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SES Awards Dinner

Remarks by

GARY LOCKE, Secretary,
United States Department of Commerce

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1 P R O C E E D I N G S

2 SECRETARY LOCKE: Well, thank you very much,
3 Shelby, for the introduction. It is really a pleasure to be
4 here. Wow, what an incredible setting. Makes me want to
5 move over here maybe.

6 [Applause.]

7 SECRETARY LOCKE: Let's thank our host, the
8 Honorable Patrick Kennedy, Under Secretary for Management
9 here at the Secretary of State, for being our host and
10 giving us such an incredible location, absolutely
11 delightful. Thank you.

12 [Applause.]

13 SECRETARY LOCKE: I also want to recognize Carol
14 Bonosaro, who is the Senior Executive Association president,
15 for all that you do on behalf of the Senior Executives in
16 the United States Government. Thank you.

17 [Applause.]

18 SECRETARY LOCKE: I have to say hi to a friend of
19 mine from the State of Washington, who is one of the
20 distinguished rank awardees, Steve Wright from Bonneville
21 Power Administration.

22 Steve, where are you? There he is. Great. Thank

1 you.

2 [Applause.]

3 SECRETARY LOCKE: And I know that Dr. Susan
4 Solomon, who is a Nobel Laureate, from the Department of
5 Commerce, one of the awardees, could not be here, but I am
6 very, very proud of her work.

7 Finally, let me just say thank you and let's give
8 a big welcome to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, General
9 Shinseki. Thank you.

10 [Applause.]

11 SECRETARY LOCKE: It is a testament to his support
12 for career people that he is here.

13 I am very, very honored to be part of this very
14 important occasion and to be in such incredibly
15 distinguished company.

16 I am also aware that I am the only thing standing
17 between you and the main course.

18 [Laughter.]

19 SECRETARY LOCKE: So experience tells me that
20 that's not a good place to linger. You do, after all, have
21 a lot of knives, I guess two knives there next to your
22 plates, so I will try to keep my remarks very, very brief.

1 I am not giving a keynote. Just a few minutes of
2 observations.

3 But again, thanks to the association for hosting
4 this and to recognize the Senior Executives and all the
5 great work that you do because the association really has
6 been working tirelessly for the nearly 30 years as an
7 advocate for good government and for the interest of the
8 executives who are the leaders and the managers of our
9 Federal agencies.

10 We have come together tonight to honor some of
11 those executives, the 2008 Presidential Distinguished Rank
12 Award recipients. This prestigious award is reserved only
13 for a talented few, a talented few in the Senior Executive
14 Service, and the sole criterion is outstanding service.
15 Outstanding service. That is amply present in this room, so
16 filled with talent, expertise, and commitment to excellence.

17 And when I look out at all of you, I am reminded
18 of what the President said just a few days ago in his very
19 first Cabinet meeting. In fact, it was this past Monday,
20 and he told us -- and General Shinseki was present there as
21 well -- quote, "I want to make government service cool
22 again." I applaud all of you for devoting your service to

1 this nation, even though it might not yet be cool.

2 The challenge ahead of us now, as you all know, is
3 to ensure that all levels of government have that same
4 single-minded commitment. You have a big role to play in
5 ensuring it does by motivating and inspiring others to
6 follow in your examples.

7 From 1994 to 1997, I was the elected Chief
8 Administrative Officer for King County, which is the Seattle
9 Metropolitan Area, and then from '97 to 2005, I was Governor
10 of the State of Washington, but it was as county executive
11 and Governor that I came to truly understand the very
12 critical role played by career government employees.

13 Let's face it. You know that political appointees
14 come and go, and we political appointees know that you know
15 that we know that you know that we come and go.

16 [Laughter.]

17 SECRETARY LOCKE: You provide the continuity and
18 the shoulder of so much of the work in the Federal agencies.
19 You turn the words of Presidents and Secretaries into
20 action, and sometimes we, the political appointees, forget
21 that.

22 But there is a pernicious strain of politics that

1 seeks to diminish what is possible from the hard-working
2 Americans who have devoted their lives to civil service, and
3 I reject that thinking. As Governor, I wanted our employees
4 to be proud to say that they were an employee of the State
5 of Washington. I wanted to have them say it with the same
6 pride as if they said that they worked for Boeing, for
7 Microsoft, or for Nordstrom.

8 I have always thought that instilling that sense
9 of pride among government employees was a critical part of
10 my duties as governor. It meant listening for new ideas
11 from those doing the work. It meant setting super high
12 stretch goals that force people to really reinvent,
13 reimagine the jobs that they performed. It meant providing
14 incentives to encourage innovation but also providing a
15 recognition for work well done.

16 I have never faulted an employee for falling short
17 of a goal that was difficult to reach, and even when things
18 went wrong and the press and the legislators were asking for
19 heads to roll, as long as people were working diligently,
20 honestly in good faith, acting reasonably, that I told our
21 employees we would never hang them out to dry, because what
22 is critical is constantly challenging ourselves to perform

1 even better, and if we worry about failure, we will never
2 take the risk necessary to achieve the extraordinary. And
3 today, the American people are counting on us, all of us, to
4 achieve the extraordinary.

5 In that pursuit of the extraordinary, I would
6 caution that we cannot expect perfection because expecting
7 perfection can oftentimes lead to paralysis or, indeed,
8 inaction, especially if the fear of failure or anything less
9 than perfection stems from a fear of reprisal or retribution
10 from superiors.

11 I'm surrounded tonight by people who surely know
12 well that lesson of the pursuit of the extraordinary, people
13 who have distinguished themselves by living lives that have
14 given so much to our country.

15 While there is not enough time to cite all of your
16 accomplishments, I can say collectively that you have all
17 made the lives of Americans better, expanding scientific and
18 technical knowledge, saving taxpayers money, streamlining
19 and improving operations and programs that provide for the
20 security and the welfare of the people of America.

21 On behalf of the President, on behalf of the
22 people of this great nation, thank you very much.

1 [Applause.]

2 SECRETARY LOCKE: And as someone whose commute has
3 just grown by thousands of miles -- I am still commuting
4 back and forth on weekends to Seattle -- I also want to
5 thank the family members here whose patience and support we
6 all know is so essential to the performance of the jobs we
7 in government perform.

8 [Applause.]

9 SECRETARY LOCKE: Clearly, in these tough economic
10 times, we are all going to need the very best minds, inside
11 and outside government, to bring their skills and experience
12 to solving the problems confronting our nation, and they are
13 very tough problems.

14 But when you return to work tomorrow, I challenge
15 all of you to think anew about how you are going to do your
16 jobs and to carry out your missions with a greater sense of
17 urgency, and I urge you to challenge your colleagues and
18 coworkers to do the same, because we face an economic
19 Katrina. We face an economic Katrina.

20 If this were, in fact, a hurricane and your
21 agencies were responding to that hurricane and to the
22 aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, we would all be moving

1 mountains to respond and provide relief. There is an
2 economic Katrina throughout America, and what we know here
3 in the Federal Service is that, with all the challenges
4 facing our nation, we are hiring more people. We enjoy good
5 benefits and good pay, but so many people throughout
6 America, the Heartland of America, are losing their jobs,
7 losing benefits, being furloughed, worried about the future,
8 worried about the future for their children and whether
9 their children will have the opportunities we all have had.

10 We must confront our task with that same sense of
11 urgency as if it was a Hurricane Katrina. It is, indeed, an
12 economic Katrina.

13 There is a difficult road ahead as we lay a
14 foundation for a stronger, more prosperous nation, a
15 foundation, as the President said, we must build on rock.
16 It will require all of us working together to rebuild that
17 foundation. It will require the focused intelligence,
18 perseverance, and dedication of our government. In short,
19 it will take the very qualities, the very same qualities for
20 which the people in this room are being recognized.

21 Public service is a high calling. It is a noble
22 calling, frequently depending sacrifice and long hours, and

