

All-hands meeting with Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham April 19, 2001

Abraham: Thank you. I want to say that I've already had a pretty exciting stop. I was taken over to TA-55 and they put me in various rooms there and had me ... suddenly I turned around and General Gordon and John Browne had disappeared and there was police tape separating me from all the other employees and ... a grinning security worker holding a mock-up of a pit. At that point I sort of cheerfully was a good sport — I held it and gave it back. A minute or so later they asked if I would like to do that with a real one, and I said sure. It was only afterward that I learned that I was the first ... the first Secretary to do that ever. That probably doesn't say much about my judgement.

We've had a great day already. We stopped at the Albuquerque Field Office, and we're spending most of the day here. Tomorrow we'll be at Sandia. I just want to start by telling you how proud I am to be in the position I hold, to be the Secretary of Energy. I'm both thrilled because I think it's a real unique opportunity for reasons I'll talk about here in a minute, but also to be the Secretary of a department with so many outstanding and talented people as we have in our department.

I have to confess that my children were not quite as impressed as I was when the announcement came. I have two 7-year olds and a 4-year old. When they found out I was going to be the secretary of energy, they actually thought I was going to be the secretary to President Bush. They were, therefore, chagrined when they learned I wasn't. Because in their minds, anybody that's the secretary to the President had to be more important than somebody who's just the Secretary of Energy. I spent a couple of weeks trying to get them convinced that this was really a pretty big deal. I said wait until I'm sworn into office. Then you're going to really understand how important Daddy's job is.

So, sure enough, on inaugural day, after you saw the President and the Vice President sworn in on the front steps of the Capitol, I later that afternoon (a couple of hours later) was confirmed by the Senate, along with Colin Powell and Don Rumsfeld and three other members, the first 6 of us who got through that afternoon. Shortly after that, we were back at the White House with our kids watching the parade when an aide came up and said, "Mr. Abraham, in a few minutes, they're going to swear you in," so I turned to my kids and said, "This is it. Now you're going to see how important I am." And, of course, in their mind was this scene of Bush up on the Capitol steps. Well, a few minutes later, we were led over to the basement of a building near the White House. So I figured that the President was going to slip away and administer the oath, and I was informed that no, he was busy with the parade. Then Cheney was busy with the parade so I thought maybe a Supreme Court Justice. But no, they were at the parade too.

Ultimately, literally, Secretary Powell and myself and [the others who'd been confirmed] were suddenly confronted by a young man whose title was the clerk of the White House Office of Administrative Services. He did not even own a robe. But he swore us in and

my children at their age would be impressed by any ceremony to some extent but they clearly did not yet believe that this was a cool job. We then drove, however, from the White House over to the department so we could visit the office. That was a Saturday 3 months ago tomorrow. When we went in and when my children saw the length of the hallways at DOE, at least in the Washington office, that confirmed to them that I was important because they were wide and they could slide if they wanted to. Ever since then I've got both personal pride and now I have my family convinced that this was the right job.

As I said, it's the right job because of what you all do and people like you across the county. I just wanted to begin today by indicating I'm here to learn, to listen and also to signal that this administration is very committed to the work that's done, particularly here at the lab and in NNSA. I just want to say with General Gordon here that he and I [will] work closely together. I very much value his counsel and his leadership in pulling together the various defense-related programs now under the new configuration that we in Congress put together. I think it's the right way to go, and I look forward to working side-by-side with John Gordon and John Browne and the other lab directors to make this program work even better than before. I believe we can do that; the President believes so as well.

Obviously, Los Alamos has a history that is a special one and, perhaps, can best be described as humbling to all of us. I'm sure when you think about the people in whose footsteps you have followed — the Oppenheimer's, the Teller's and others. It's on one hand inspiring and on the other hand kind of overwhelming. I sort of felt the same way during my term in the United States Senate, because when you change desks, you always carve your name in the desk that you had. I open these drawers, and I'm sitting at a desk that had some of the most illustrious leaders in the history of the United States Senate of America sitting at them... So I kind of know how you feel when your predecessors include the likes of Daniel Webster, Harry Truman or John F. Kennedy. I'm sure that's how people here feel. I suspect that's a daunting challenge, but I believe that the people working here today are every bit as able and talented as those who preceded you, and we look forward to accomplishing great things together.

You look at what has happened and what Los Alamos has been able to contribute to mankind, and in my judgement those benefits are incalculable. Whether it was victory for the allies in the second world war or it was victory for the west in the Cold War. But for you, breakthrough science would take place in another country. But for you, supercomputing would be a technology for us to purchase abroad, not develop and refine here at home. And, but for the people who've worked at this facility, we would now be living in the 55th year of the Cold War, instead of enjoying the 11th year of the peace dividend. And so, I just want to acknowledge that today and say that the President and our administration are extraordinarily proud of that. But we don't live in a totally peaceful world, even though the Cold War may be over; it's still a dangerous place. Our stockpile, the weapons that are built and maintained is a result of no small measure of the work that's here remain the vital factor that ensures the stability of America's national security in a changing and dangerous world. As much as we admire the work of the

scientists who brought us the first weapons—Fat Man and Little Boy—it is clear that your scientific contributions are no less important than theirs.

When I was in the Senate, as I said, I was not only a little bit in awe of those who preceded me, but there were days when we were in the midst of boring debates about issues that were sort of esoteric and not particularly exciting. I would sit back and say “Gee, wouldn’t it have been exciting to have been here during the debates that led up to the Civil War, or during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. I suspect there are sometimes moments like that here when people say, “Maybe it would have been more exciting to have been present at the creation of the atomic era.” But I came to realize that the issues we tackle today; whether they are the ones that we deal with in the Senate or the ones you deal with here in the science work that you do, are just as important and at least as difficult, if not more so, scientifically. General Gordon has pointed out to me that our labs are today again exploring territory that is virtually as uncharted and complex as that which was opened up by the scientists of the Manhattan project. No one in history, as far as I know, has ever tried to confirm the reliability of weapons without testing them and yet, that’s precisely what we are doing now. It’s really an astonishing technical and scientific enterprise, and it calls for the same qualities of genius that this facility has unleashed throughout its history.

At the same time, our mission today is broader and more difficult because we have added counter proliferation and nonproliferation to our traditional missions of deterrents as we attempt to reduce a host of threats to our nation. I can’t think of anything more compelling in terms of a mission or one that calls upon a greater degree of technical excellence than those that we confront today.

As I said, I saw the tradition of excellence as it continues when I was over at TA-55 observing the work that’s been done with respect to the beginning of the production of plutonium pits for our weapons systems. I just want to say that I was overwhelmed by the quality of the work that is done there and the people who do that work. I also want to say that I’ve come to see that even as we honor the past, we don’t live in the past; we’re moving forward. From the Strategic Computing Complex here to the Human Genome studies, Los Alamos embodies the very best in American science and technology and it represents our future. Not only with respect to national security, which is every day more and more dependent on advanced technology, but it also represents cutting-edge science across the board.

As John [Browne] indicated when he was introducing me, in the Senate I had a chance to serve on the science committee of the Senate and was able to participate as the lead sponsor or one of the chief co-sponsors of almost all of the major technology-related legislation that passed over the last few years. It kind of brought into focus for me, in so many ways, the amazing breakthroughs that are going on across America. It’s my hope that America will always remain the leader in terms of technological advancements here on the planet. In that sense alone, it makes me especially proud to have this chance.

I'm excited to be the Secretary of Energy because now I have the opportunity to focus the interest I've had in keeping America's science ahead of the rest of the world through this agency. [DOE is], as you know, the third largest funder of basic research in the United States and the largest government sponsor of research with respect to the physical sciences. In my judgement, DOE's future in science and America's future in science is going to be very dependent on our ability to recruit and retain people like yourselves.

One of the challenges that I also worked on in the Senate and have brought with me in terms of recognizing it's significance to this new job, is the realization of exactly how important it is for us to retain the talented people we have, people like yourselves, throughout our complex, as well as our ability to recruit new people as the needs arise in the years ahead. The private sector needs and will pay for professionals with the kind of expertise that is employed right here at Los Alamos.

A lot of you know the challenge that we have in government is being able to compete with an ever more competitive private sector in this country. I know from first-hand experience that government does not always make it easy for its employees. We have to work hard to attract and to keep the very best talent. And it's not just limited to people who work in technology — even those of us who are in elected and appointed offices are often confronted with lucrative options that serve as pretty significant temptations. So there is always an appeal for us to think about more lucrative careers. The difference is that people like yourself, people like you throughout our labs march to a higher calling, to commitment to public service. Because at the end of the day you believe that what you're doing can't just simply be equated in dollars and cents. And I want you to know that I appreciate that very much, and the President appreciates it very much. [I] recognize from the work I've done in the last few years just exactly what the sacrifices that some people have made amount to in terms of the monetary sacrifice. I hope you'll believe me when I say that the contributions that you are making to the country — not only those from the past but [those] that I believe will be made in the future. So on behalf of the administration, I just wanted to come here today and, more than anything else, convey my thanks for the contributions and the commitments you make by working with us, by helping us to make this the finest facility and the finest science program on the planet. I really do appreciate it very much.

We move ahead with a number of very exciting things going on in the department and throughout the federal government. We've, as I've said, been there three months as of tomorrow. One of the things the President asked us to do at the very outset of the administration was to begin a series of reviews of the various programs, many of them affecting the Department of Energy. We have, as many of you have seen, the meeting of the Cheney task force which has the responsibility for evaluating and for trying to determine the best set of policies to constitute a national energy plan for the next 20 years. I'm not going to dwell on that topic at great length. I just want to tell you it's a major challenge. We estimate that over the next 20 years the demand for electricity in this country is going to increase by 45 percent. In order to satisfy that demand, and that's in the face of significant improvements in terms of efficiency and conservation ... we'll have to build more than one power plant a week for the next 20 years just to be able to meet those

increases in demand. And a lot of it is stemming from the transition we are going through from previous kinds of economy to the technology and information-age economy that we live in today that, in no small measure, all of us contribute to. Because of that, it makes the challenge of having a national energy plan absolutely urgent, and we will have one in a matter of a few weeks as we complete that work.

But in addition, at both the defense department as well as at DOE and in conjunction on an interagency basis with the National Security Council, we've also launched a variety of reviews of our deterrents programs, of our counterproliferation programs and a variety of other programs that relate to our long-term strategic needs and strategic objectives, especially as they relate to the sorts of weapons that our stockpile stewardship program is responsible for maintaining in terms of reliability, safety and security. I consider nothing that I have in terms of responsibility more important than the duty that I share with the Secretary of Defense to certify to the President, along with our lab directors, the fitness of our stockpile. So, what we are trying to do in the first days of this administration is reevaluate all these programs so that as we move forward we'll have policies in place that will drive the budgets, not just this year's but especially those in the future, to accomplish the strategic objectives that we are going to set.

We have begun the step forward in some respect, with regard to some of these policies, based on work that General Gordon had already begun with some of you in relationship to the creation of NNSA. At this point, to some extent, we're joining forces with the rest of the new administration team to make sure that we can bring all of those policies together instead of having DOE going in one direction and the Strategic Planning Counsel going in another. We hope to soon be able to complete that work, at which time I think you'll see in the budgets that will be forthcoming a reflection of our desire to make a major commitment to our National Nuclear Security Administration. However, as you know, we've already increased by \$130 million our commitments in some of these areas and more is to come. We've increased the defense stockpile work by a 14 percent increase in the budget that we currently have. We're also trying to improve the department's efforts to re-establish our capability, as you know, for producing plutonium pits, a process I just observed, and we will be making significant contributions and commitments in that area in the months ahead.

As we do it, what I've tried to convey to the White House and to the other policy-makers, is the significant importance of the stockpile stewardship process that we are so integrally tied up with here in the department and the NNSA. In an era where we don't test, as you know better than anybody does, the work that we do to certify is the most critical component in many respects of America's national security that we have. Our deterrent capability is only premised on the belief on the part of the rest of the world that the weapons we have will work in a reliable fashion. If we don't test those weapons, but in fact work through the science-based stockpile program to try to ensure that reliability, then the work you're doing is probably as central as anything could possibly be to the long-range security of this country. It is my hope and my plan to work together with John Gordon to make sure that sufficient resources are provided to be able to do that work in

the fullest sense. Once we have established the long-range missions that this country will have with respect to our nuclear stockpile in the days ahead.

I just want to also talk briefly about security issues because I know in the last year they have been significant here at Los Alamos. I learned as a member of the Senate that Congress is more than willing to invest in the remarkable and the critical work that takes place here and at our other labs. Congress and the appropriators, in particular, do so on the grounds that the work is vital and productive, but also they make those commitments so long as they believe that we maintain a vigilant guard over the work that we do. I want you to know that I believe the people who work here are committed, not just to doing that work, but to the security of the work that you do. I believe that very strongly. However, when Congress asks questions as to whether or not we are taking all the measures that we need to, I came here today to be able to go back and tell my former colleagues that we are taking security seriously. I'm glad I had a chance to go through some of the touring that I have done and witness personally and first-hand how effectively we're moving forward on the security front so that I can make the reassurances that I think you want me to make on your behalf. Significantly, we're increasing in the budget that we've already proposed for this year; 43 percent increase in funding for cyber-security. Throughout our complex, and in the other departments as well, there is a need for us to be constantly upgrading to meet the challenges that are posed with respect to cyber-security issues.

You in the labs recognize, I suspect, better than anyone else, the harm that can come if we let our guard down with respect to security. In my judgement, there is no reason why the culture of science and culture of security can't coexist. We have to work together to make sure they do. And under our administration and working together with General Gordon, it is my goal to make sure we go the extra mile to accomplish both of those objectives. We want the people working here to feel that they have the latitude, the academic freedom and the support to do their jobs. We also want you to feel that it can be done in a way that's consistent with the best security practices. We intend to accomplish that.

Finally, I just want to say this; earlier today I had the chance to fly over the whole Los Alamos area in what was a slightly bumpy ride on the plane. I was told it was the single most difficult landing that John Browne had had in 20 years of coming out here — I appreciate being able to participate in that record-shattering achievement. But in doing so [flying over the area], I was able to personally witness first-hand the destruction that was wrought by the Cerro Grande Fire. I have heard a lot about what the people in your community and throughout our complex did in response. About the sacrifices that were made, the many acts of heroism that took place both in dealing with the immediate challenge of the fire and also in the aftermath. Obviously, over the course of history, there will be a lot of stories about the things that happened at Los Alamos. Most of them will deal with the science and the people who are behind that science in the purely scientific world. But I also want to take note of today, the kind of personal commitment that was reflected in the response to the fire by all of you and in this community because it's a different kind of achievement. But one I think of equal note. What we saw were people of all kinds of different cultures and religions and ethnic origins, joining together

to create a single effort to protect the community and to help it rebound. Just in the same way that at the very beginning of the work that was done here, we saw people of a variety of different cultures and religions and backgrounds joined together to help us bring about victory in World War II. Unlike nations that see their strength flowing from uniformity, we know in America that our strength really flows from its diversity. Throughout the history of Los Alamos, that has been probably a lesson taught better than any.

So I just want to finish today by thanking you for not just the achievements you do in the professional sense, but also what you have done in terms of this community. What you do to send a signal to us throughout the federal government, that excellence is not something that only exists in a few companies in America, but can exist in the public sectors as well. I want you to know that as the Secretary of this department it is my steadfast commitment to do as much I can to make working at this department, whether in the labs or in the main office in Washington, or in any of our regional offices, the envy of the other people who work in federal government. I want every one of my fellow cabinet secretaries to wish they were the Secretary of Energy. I want the people who work in the other government science programs to wish that they worked in the science programs that are part of DOE. I believe that we are as fine an organization as there is in the federal government, and it's my hope over the next two years to make that very clear to the people throughout Washington and across America. I certainly believe that all of you make the contribution necessary to achieve that image and I'll do my very best to make you proud of my efforts as well.

Thank you very much.