Thank you. It is an honor to be with men and women who are on the front lines of defending our state, responding to disasters and saving lives. I want to thank both the state director of homeland security, Steve McCraw, and the head of the Department of Emergency Management, Jack Colley, for their tremendous leadership. It has been a good three weeks. We won a hard-fought election contest, we had a nice Thanksgiving holiday with family, and the Aggie Basketball team cracked the top ten for the first time since anyone can remember. Plus, ever since Friday for some reason my watch is stuck on the time twelve to seven.

Since I first became governor in December of 2000, the world around us has drastically changed. Six years ago, this kind of conference would have been highly unlikely, and certainly it wouldn't have had the words "homeland security" in the moniker. A lot has happened since then. We have lived through the horror of 9/11, the subsequent horror of deadly biological agents like anthrax being released via the mail, the foiling of a sophisticated airliner plot in London, and the toppling of two terrorist regimes. We have also survived two deadly hurricanes, extraordinary wildfires, and other natural phenomenon of such a wide variety that we could only be living in one place, and that is Texas. It is not the fact that we face threats of both a manmade and natural variety that is new, it is the destructive capability of these threats that is unlike anything we have faced before. There have always been rogue states and criminal organizations, just never with access to such destructive nuclear, chemical and biological weaponry. Even the ferocity of recent hurricanes that have arisen out of warmer gulf waters underscores the imperative of an all-hands-on-deck approach to disaster response.

From firefighters to public health workers, law officers to transportation officials, there are a wide variety of first responders who must be part of a seamless disaster response team in a modern age of sudden, grave threats large population centers. I am reminded of the eleven roles on any given play on the football field. Sure, the quarterback gets the most attention, and running backs and wide receivers score the most touchdowns, but none of it is possible without the linemen in the trenches. Each player is a critical element, and must carry out their assignment. And it is not lost on me the number of assignments that must be carried out any time there is a large-scale threat to the public. Whether it is the preparation of evacuation routes, disseminating critical information to the public, evacuating the homeless, moving those with special needs, procuring fuel and delivering it against traffic, providing rapid response teams to respond to a variety of threats, maintaining a secure environment, or just providing a calm presence in the midst of the storm, there is no shortage of critical...
tasks in the immediate aftermath, and when warned, in the hours proceeding a disaster. Our advantage is your training and experience, modern technology tools and dedicated public service professionals when disaster strikes.

The strength of Texas’s response capability is its local communities and first-responder professionals who demonstrated to the nation its competence and compassion over the last 16 months. That is why, when Washington tried to usurp local and state control in disaster response, I went to Washington and not only said “no,” but “hell no.” I have a lot of respect for our nation’s military and its capabilities. Leading disaster response, however, is not its calling card. That should always be left to local officials and first responders who know the local communities, who have trained together in those communities, and who will live in those communities when the storm is over. I have never found one Texan who would feel better about a bureaucrat in Washington answering the phone when they dial 911. That is not to say that we have things perfectly squared away at the state and local level. Quite frankly, there are immense challenges posed by a large-scale disaster that are compounded in large, urban areas.

Maintaining up-to-date information on the location of vulnerable populations is one of the most daunting challenges we face, as is moving the many thousands who cannot evacuate themselves. Despite a tremendous response to Katrina and Rita, we learned that a lot of Texans won’t leave their homes if there is no place to secure their pets. We also have added private sector representation from the energy sector to the state operations center after we ran into difficult challenges in getting fuel to stranded motorists. We have also improved contra-flow planning efforts. Though let there be no mistake about it: if we can’t move rush hour commuters in Houston efficiently on a normal weekday, it certainly won’t be very efficient when hundreds of thousands of additional cars hit the same highways. That is one reason the Trans Texas Corridor makes abundant sense, so we have additional routes to move Texans to safety.

When it comes to disaster response, the axiom I the same used by my 6-man football coach: you play like you practice. That is why we have been aggressive about training exercises because we know plans on paper don’t always translate into solutions on the ground. Plus, there is no shortage of dangerous scenarios that face a people with the world’s largest petro-chemical industry, 600 miles of coastline and a twelve hundred mile international border. Just looking at tomorrow’s workshop agenda tells me that. From providing mass care to vulnerable populations, to reacting to an outbreak of bird flu, to responding to a scenario that we often think is reserved only for those who live overseas, which is homicide bombers, there is no shortage of scenarios that keep me awake at night, and that test the strength of our response planning. Perhaps there is no greater threat to our nation than a porous border that is exploited by terrorists, drug smugglers and other criminal organizations who have no regard for human life or human rights.

Let me conclude with some thoughts on border security. Even though the vast majority of illegal immigrants are economic migrants seeking opportunity, we cannot be naïve and think that among those millions there are not some that come here to do our nation harm. And they don’t wear a certain uniform or send out press advisories announcing their arrival. Sheriff Danny Dominguez of Presidio County 135 miles of border to patrol, and four or five deputies. Its rural areas like this, not large border towns, that are the main targets of criminal operatives smuggling people and illegal products into our nation. It was the county next door, Hudspeth County, that received national attention when Sheriff Arvin West’s deputies pursued three vehicles loaded with contraband, with one vehicle getting stuck in the river while men dressed in Mexican Military uniforms stood guard as they unloaded narcotics. Too often these sheriffs are outgunned and outmanned. They need help.
The State of Texas is doing all that it can to help with Operation Rio Grande. We have sent strike teams of troopers, fixed-wing and rotary assets, water patrol teams, investigators and new vehicles and equipment. We need more. My great fear is that the next attack on America, whether it is in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, or Houston, could occur because our border is not secure. To those in the ACLU and other liberal groups who think we are using the guise of anti-terrorism operations to crack down on illegal immigration, I can only say you are wrong—dead wrong. Yes, stepping up law enforcement efforts to stop border crime will inevitably lead to higher apprehensions of those who come here illegally. But that is a byproduct of our effort, the main focus of which is to prevent all forms of crime, including the smuggling of terrorist and drug smuggling operatives into our country. Don’t think for a second that terrorist exploitation of our international border isn’t real. First of all, intelligence reports say it is, and so do apprehensions of numerous individuals from several countries with known terrorist ties, whether in the Middle East or the tri-border region of South America. I will be asking the legislature for $100 million to secure our border because it makes good public policy. I remained saddened by heart-wrenching stories of law officers being shot by individuals with criminal records who have been previously deported. We can do better, for their sake, and for the sake of all law-abiding Texans.

Your work is critical to building a safer Texas. I appreciate the many individuals in the public sector who answer the call of service, knowing their life could be jeopardized in the face of a grave threat. I also appreciate our private sector partners, not only for sponsoring this conference, but for the critical role many of you play in delivering critical services during disaster response. Thank you for taking part in this important homeland security conference, and please know that I am committed to providing you whatever resources you need to do your job effectively because I know lives will be saved because of it. Thank you, and God bless you all.