

along with all of you for Senator Cohen's swearing-in.

I want to congratulate him on the swift confirmation of his nomination. It says a great deal about this extraordinary man that his Senate colleagues paid him the tribute of a unanimous vote of approval. In so doing, the Senate sent a strong signal of its intention to work in a constructive and bipartisan spirit to preserve and enhance our national security.

Bill Cohen is the embodiment of that spirit. Throughout his years as a Senator and a Congressman, he's reached across the divisions of party to strengthen our defenses, shaping the START I arms control treaty, helping reorganize the Department of Defense, guiding the most important deliberations about our Armed Forces. He has never forgotten, as he said so eloquently in his testimony on Wednesday, that at the end of every debate stand our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines, who look to us for leadership, not political strife.

As we move forward to face the challenges of the next century, America's leadership in the world will depend upon that understanding, just as it did in World War II and the cold war. We know that to seize all the possibilities of this moment and to keep the United States the greatest force for peace and freedom, for security and prosperity, we must continue to have the best-trained, best-equipped, best-prepared troops on Earth, because at the heart of America's power is our military strength and will.

Whether they are deterring a dangerous tyrant in the Persian Gulf, helping the people of Bosnia build peace in their shattered land, defending democracy in the cold war's last frontier on the Korean Peninsula, or standing watch for liberty here at home, our Armed Forces maintain America's status as the indispensable nation.

In Bill Cohen, our military will have a Secretary of Defense with the vision, judgment, and dedication that our era demands. He has served the people of Maine with tremendous distinction. And now I'm pleased that all Americans will benefit from his leadership and his wisdom.

On their behalf, I now ask the Vice President to swear William Cohen into his new office.

[At this point, Vice President Gore administered the oath of office, and Secretary Cohen made brief remarks.]

Pentagon Priorities

Q. What will be your top priority at the Pentagon? Are you going to hit the deck running? [Laughter]

Secretary Cohen. I intend to hit it running. My first—I have a full day starting immediately after this ceremony. I'm going to be paying a final visit with Secretary Perry. I'm going to be meeting with General Shalikashvili and Deputy Secretary White to discuss matters this afternoon. I'm sending messages to all of our troops today, along with the commanders of the regional commands. I'll be meeting later this afternoon with all of the service chiefs and secretaries, and then beginning some budget deliberations and briefings, starting at 5:30 this afternoon with John Hamre. So I have a fairly full schedule today.

And we'll look forward to starting this process of trying to retain and attract the best qualified people in our military, to make sure that we provide them with the best equipment, training, and that we seek to modernize our forces for the future. So all of that is very high on my agenda.

Q. Are you going to ask for more money? [Laughter]

Secretary Cohen. I'm going to do my best to see to it that we have the best military that the world has ever seen.

The President. Everybody else does. [Laughter]

Secretary Cohen. I see Senator Stevens over to my right, and I'm sure that I'll be calling upon him for assistance as we go through the budgetary process.

Q. What is the budget for defense—a secret?

The President. We're releasing it in a few days.

Thank you all very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:10 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Secretary Cohen's wife, Janet Langhart.