



Election Assistance Commission  
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Remarks by Dr. DeForest B. Soaries, Jr.,  
Chairman, U.S. Election Assistance Commission  
to the  
Mid Winter Meeting of the National Association of Secretaries of State  
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To President Kiffmeyer, Executive Director Leslie Reynolds and other leaders and members of the National Association of Secretaries of State: Thank you for allowing the Commissioners of the Election Assistance Commission to participate in this your mid-winter conference as our first public appearance together. This honor is only exceeded by the honor I have to serve with some of the finest Americans and most genuine people I have ever met – Gracia Hillman, Paul DeGregorio and Ray Martinez.

I once recall hearing a news reporter ask man who was a double amputee how he had successfully managed to climb a tremendously high mountain. His response was simple but profound. He said that he did it “one step at a time.”

In many ways that brief interview offers a summary of the inaugural experiences of the United States Election Assistance Commission. We began our work in a manner that could be likened to preparing to climb a very high mountain without the use of our legs. Our charge was to lead the implementing the Help America Vote Act of 2002. Like our mountain climber, we too faced tremendous challenges. Our entire lives for the last few weeks have been like trying to climb mountains without legs. It was as if the timing of our appointment process amputated one leg and the lack of an adequate budget to do our work severed our other leg.

But we are here to day to report to you that like our hero who climbed his mountain, we, the EAC Commissioners, are determined to climb our mountain. We may have our challenges, our appointments may have taken a minute longer than we all would have liked, we may not have much time until November -- but HAVA is the law of the land and we are happy to join the movement that you have helped to lead for election reform in America.

The very first words of HAVA say this: “To establish a program to provide funds to the states...” As a result of this explicit and historic federal commitment, we decided that the

first step of our process should be to insure that the appropriated federal funds were in fact provided to the states. I am pleased to announce to you today that we are now preparing to present all of the State's HAVA plans for publication in the Federal Register so that forty five days after publication, the federal government can release \$2.3 billion dollars to support the purchase of equipment, the education of voters, the training of poll workers and other preparations for the 2004 federal elections. So much progress has been made already and now more work will be able to happen when the unprecedented financial pledge made by the federal government becomes reality. We are climbing our mountain – one step at a time. HAVA funds are one the way.

The second step for the EAC was to really begin getting established as a federal agency. Therefore, while the Commissioners have been reading the State's plans, receiving briefings about rules for travel, figuring out the best way to answer letters without stationary and engaging in many other very interesting particulars, we knew that it was paramount that we get some help. The best news was that the HAVA legislation provided for the transfer of the Federal Election Commission Office of Election Administration to the EAC. This office consisted of perhaps the only people who actually knew that we were in town and was actually ready to help us get started. The interesting news was that our budget did not give us any funding to hire any more staff than the four people who were already working for OEA. Although the four staff at OEA – Penelope Bonsall, Peg Simms, Brian Hancock and Bryan Whitener -- are all wonderful people – none of them were really sitting still waiting for us to arrive in Washington. They really did not need us to figure out how they would spend their days.

This staff has long been involved in Voting Systems Standards work, National Voter Registration Act work, Provisional Ballot Study work, foreign delegation briefing work and answering various and sundry questions from election administration officials and individual voters from everywhere work.

The operation of a brand new Commission whose mission is federal elections and which began in the year of the biggest federal election requires some capacity. And capacity is secured with money. Asking the EAC to lead and implement HAVA without funding can be likened to another place and time when certain people were asked to make bricks without straw. Those people simply left town! They did not even stick around for a supplemental appropriation or the next budget cycle. But the EAC Commissioners made up our minds that we were going to climb this mountain – one step at a time.

And so I am pleased to announce that we are in the process of identifying some staff, securing our permanent office space, creating our website, connecting our email and getting the phone number that will be answered “Thank you for calling the Election Assistance Commission.” We are climbing our mountain one step at a time.

Someone may be wondering how we are able to do all of this with no real budget and before additional funds are made available. When my sons were seven years old, my wife told them to make up their beds and to clean up their room. A few minutes later a policeman rang the doorbell to our house. When my wife answered the door, the police

officer asked her if things were all right at our house. She assured him that things were fine. The officer then asked her why someone from our house had called 911. My younger son said that he had called 911 because his teacher told his class that if they ever needed some help, call 911! The EAC Commissioners know what my son knew – we know who to call for help. We called Senators, we called members of Congress, we called the White House, we called other federal agencies – and the entire federal government is coming to our aid because they know the importance of our mission. So we are climbing our mountain – one step at a time.

The next step for us will be to plunge into our mission. We are aware that many states will ask, “When we receive our money, what does the Commission have to say about where we spend our money.” Not only is the country interested in the integrity of elections, but there is a growing interest in the technology of elections. The good news is that many of you have been working hard since the mid nineteen seventies to create Standards for elections that have been adopted voluntarily and have made America the elections envy of the world. And we are going to move as quickly as we can to establish the Technical Standards Guidelines Committee to continue that work and begin considering important issues like increasing the number of Independent Testing Authorities, updating guidance on security standards for DRE and internet voting and sponsoring a rigorous conversation about vote verification standards.

But don’t ever allow the sensationalism that the relatively few problems attract obliterate our reality. The fact is this: your work regularly creates more elections successes than failures and there is more good news than bad news in the land.

I wish there were more stories about the thousands of seventy and eighty year old volunteers who get up at four o’clock in the morning and work until midnight on election day making sure democracy works. I wish we could see more pictures of people who attend training sessions, learning new technologies weeks before the election just to make sure voters have someone to assist them when they arrive to cast their ballot. I wish the media would help us tell the story of the millions of hours of work done by people who are paid either nothing or much less than minimum wage but who do it because they love their country. I wish the world could see the excitement of election officials when they visit polling places at ten o’clock in the morning and discover that turnout looks good and people are exercising their right to vote.

Sure we have some things to fix. But the first thing we ought to fix is the impression that voting in American is in technological free fall and that the end is near. Or that we are so vulnerable to high tech tampering that no election result has integrity. These assertions are insults to your quality service and your fine leadership. The EAC is committed to helping you tell your story.

On September 11, 2001 I was serving as Secretary of State of the great state of New Jersey. It was my job to coordinate our state’s initial responses to the needs of New York after the attack of terrorists and the demise of the Twin Towers. I rode through New York City that afternoon after taking a boat across the Hudson River and I saw flames melting

steel as if it was butter in a microwave oven. It became clear very quickly that we were under attack and we were attacked because of what we stand for. Perhaps the most important principle for which we stand is that those who are governed must give their consent and that consent occurs in the form of a vote. Therefore, the EAC was established to promote, protect and enhance the most foundational principle that makes America America.

And so we are proud to join the movement – to march with the army that helped create HAVA -- to make America a good America for everyone. We will climb our mountain to insure that every citizen has access to that which is guaranteed all citizens.

We may limp sometimes – we may crawl sometimes – we may cry sometimes – we may be denied sometimes – but we will never, ever give up. We will work with you and serve you. We seek to be public servants and not political stars. And when we have climbed our mountain – we too shall say that we did it one step at a time.

Thank you.