

# Contrite Homeland Security Secretary offers "sincere" apology to veterans

Friday, April 24, 2009

WASHINGTON, DC -Hunched forward with head bowed, the Secretary of Homeland Security looked the National Commander of The American Legion straight in the eye and said, very quietly, "I'm sorry, Dave."

It was a contrite and embattled Janet Napolitano early this afternoon who offered David K. Rehbein an apology for a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) report that many have interpreted as a stinging slap in the face to veterans and active duty military personnel. The DHS assessment, leaked to the press last week, characterized so-called "disgruntled veterans" as being ripe for harvesting by right-wing extremist groups. "The report was not worthy of this department," said the Secretary, "or of veterans. It was very badly written and should never have been released." Secretary Napolitano explained that the controversial document had been issued prematurely and, in its broadcast form, not properly vetted. "An analyst hit the send button when he had no authority to do so," she said.

Secretary Napolitano and National Commander David Rehbein met today at DHS headquarters at the behest of the Commander. Commander Rehbein had been angered by the report's implications and specifically in its use of Oklahoma City terror bomber Timothy McVeigh as an example - the sole example, in fact - of a domestic threat who happened to have served in the military at one time. Secretary Napolitano admitted that the McVeigh reference, in her words, "probably came from me." Ms. Napolitano had once served on the team that prosecuted McVeigh and, she said, that horrific case had sensitized her to the point that the prejudicial reference to the bomber survived in the context of the report. Secretary Napolitano assured Commander Rehbein that "steps had been taken (to assure that) this will never happen again." She said that additional layers of review had now been added to her department's report dissemination process.

Commander Rehbein accepted the apology and turned the 45-minute discussion to topics that will serve to help America's veterans. In the end, the DHS Secretary and the Commander agreed to keep lines of communication open between DHS and the Legion and to explore ways to work in tandem to bolster national security and advocate on behalf of veterans. The Secretary pledged to appoint a VSO (Veterans Service Organization) liaison within DHS and redouble efforts to recruit veterans into DHS-related U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection positions. She also agreed to participate in veterans job fairs and assist "in any way possible" to help returning military personnel transition fully and successfully into civilian life. She also asked for an opportunity to address veterans en masse to offer an apology for the controversial report and outline ways the Department of Homeland Security can help repair its strained relationship with the veterans' community.

In post-meeting media interviews, Commander Rehbein characterized the meeting as productive and the Secretary's peace offerings as sincere. "I think this unfortunate circumstance may lead to something very good," he said.