REMARKS BY ENERGY SECRETARY BILL RICHARDSON AT THE PADUCAH TOWN HALL MEETING, PADUCAH, KENTUCKY SEPT. 17, 1999

Good evening. I wish I could be here under happier circumstances, but I think have some positive news for you.

I am with you tonight to assure you, in the strongest possible terms, that I have heard your concerns about activities in the past at this plant that may have affected the health of employees. We have heard you and we are investigating these issues fully.

The national security mission performed in Paducah is a reflection on the hard work and dedication of the people who work here. The men and women who have worked in this facility helped the United States win the Cold War and now help us keep the peace. We recognize our obligation to them. And we don't intend to forget that obligation. Anyone who may have become ill because of this work should be honored and rewarded for their service, and not have work-related medical problems neglected or ignored.

In June, we sent a team of expert health physicists here to assess the situation. They did not uncover any immediate threats to public health, worker safety or the environment. On August 8th, we commissioned a new, in-depth investigation, and the Department of Energy is also in close contact with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and other agencies to fully address these issues.

And last week, I ordered a one-day safety stand-down here at Paducah to refocus on existing safety programs. We wanted to give employees and managers an opportunity to raise concerns, to get answers to your questions and to suggest improvements.

We aren't stopping there.

We are asking the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences to independently investigate the relationship between hazardous exposures and illnesses of our workers here at Paducah and at other Energy Department sites.

Two. We will expand legislation to compensate current and former workers who are ill because of exposure to beryllium at Energy Department nuclear sites to include a pilot program for workers who have been exposed to radioactive contamination. We will soon send this legislation to Congress.

Three. We are launching a comprehensive study of worker medical history since the 1950s and we have already instituted a program to monitor the medical situation of current workers. This is in addition to the monitoring that we are already doing for former workers. We want to find out if anyone has been made sick from exposure to radioactive materials while working here in Paducah.
Four. I ordered the Department's Office of General Counsel to assess the contractual

and legal responsibilities of our contractors. I will be asking the contractors for all of their health and environmental records. I will hold all of our contractors, past and present, responsible for their actions.

And finally, I have ordered the Department's experts to reassess our Fiscal Year 2000 budget request to make sure it addresses the important health and safety issues at our gaseous diffusion plant sites. If it doesn't, I will ask Congress to make sure it does. We will be sending a budget amendment to Congress to provide an additional $21 million to Paducah for a health assessment, for medical monitoring of workers and to speed up the cleanup here.

I want to let you know that I have heard your concerns and I am taking action. I will insist that these issues be dealt with fully, I will insist that the safety of the workers here not be compromised, and I will insist that injured workers be fairly compensated.

Let me be clear. I will meet our obligation to our workers. Before I close, I want to recognize someone in your community whose courage and determination has reminded us of that obligation: Mrs. Joe Harding. Mrs. Harding, I want to present you with this gold medal as a symbol of our sincere appreciation.

The certificate reads: "In appreciation for your personal contribution in reminding us of the human face of the men and women who contributed to the nation's efforts and ultimate success in winning the Cold War." Mrs. Harding, thank you.

With that, I am sure some of you have questions, so let's get to them.