



A Union of Professionals

**Convention Speech by
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American Federation of Teachers
Las Vegas, July 15, 2002**

Sisters, brothers, friends and honored guests - welcome to the 77th Convention of the American Federation of Teachers. It's great to see so many friends and colleagues here today.

It's been a long two years since the 2000 Convention when we welcomed a new century with a strong and growing union, a strong and growing economy, and a strong and growing voice on the issues that affect our professions. Al Gore was ahead in the polls; and every other week, it seemed, a new democracy was popping up somewhere in the world. With an eye toward the future, the delegates embraced the recommendations of the AFT Futures Committee - that we work more cooperatively across constituency groups and sharpen our focus on organizing, political action, and improving the institutions in which our members work.

A lot has changed since then...particularly with the dramatic, defining and painful events of September 11.

We lost many members of our AFT family that day - including three members of the Washington Teachers Union, who were in the plane that hit the Pentagon, 34 members of the New York State Public Employees Federation, who were trapped in their offices at the World Trade Center, and eight members of the Professional Staff Congress, some of whom were firefighters and emergency workers who ran into the Towers to save others. Countless friends and family members were also lost to AFT members, staff, and officers around the country.

Please join me for a moment of silence to honor the memory of all who died that day and to pay tribute to the courage of all who they left behind...

Thank you.

I also want to acknowledge, with profound appreciation and respect, the many members - from every sector of this union - who literally helped to save lives. This includes the teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school staff in New York City, who rushed to evacuate all students from harm's way; the nurses, physicians, social workers and psychologists who volunteered to help students, rescuers, and survivors deal with the trauma; the public employees who worked to keep the government running, despite the personal loss of close friends and colleagues; and the AFT and NEA members from all across the country who contributed so generously to our joint recovery fund.

I would also like to offer a special tribute to those members and their families who serve in the Armed Forces, National Guard, and Military Reserves who are doing so much to defend us, our freedoms, and our way of life. We are forever grateful.

Now, I would like you to help me welcome some of our newest affiliates, particularly the more than 3,000 school employees from right here in Nevada who are now represented by the AFT.

New members also include healthcare professionals from Kansas and Oregon; part-time community college faculty throughout California, teaching and research assistants from Michigan, Oregon and Pennsylvania; full-time professors in Vermont; public employees in Connecticut, Ohio and New Mexico; PSRPs from Minnesota and New York; and teachers in the non-bargaining states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas and West Virginia. Welcome...



I also want to extend a warm welcome to our guests from the NEA and to the delegates from our merged states and locals, especially those who are attending their first AFT convention after years of representing members at gatherings of the NEA. We are very happy to see you.

You have our support and admiration for taking on the incredibly difficult task of trying to meld two very different organizational structures and cultures into a new and stronger whole. By doing this you are also helping to move us all closer to the ideal of teacher unity.

In the meantime, the work of building the AFT goes on. We've taken the charge of the Futures Report to heart and have continued to organize and grow. In fact, I'm happy to tell you that the state of this union is stronger than ever!

Together, we've managed to accomplish something extraordinary. Even as the analysts continue to write about the decline of organized labor, the AFT has enjoyed 21 straight years of membership growth - adding 187,110 new members just since our last Convention. That's the biggest net increase in ANY two-year period in AFT history! ...And brings our total membership to just under 1.3 million. Our growth has been outstanding. In fact, I'm proud to say that we are the fastest growing union in the labor movement - and have been for the past five years.

This growth is occurring across all sectors of the union: PreK-12 teachers, higher education, school-related employees, healthcare, state and local government workers, and retirees. There are some very important reasons for this, which I'll come back to.

But first, I want to mention one of the few positive developments that emerged from the horrific events of September 11. In particular, that after so many years of being vilified by anti-government extremists, the work of public servants has regained respect in America. This nation's newest heroes are the firefighters, police officers, emergency medical personnel, teachers, postal workers, and other civil servants who have dedicated their lives to helping their communities.

All I can say is: It's about time!

In times of terrible crisis, like 9/11, people suddenly remember why government exists. Day in and day out, you and others like you provide the services that we take for granted, yet literally can't live without. Services that are essential for our collective strength and individual well being - like good schools and an educated citizenry, clean air and clean water, safe streets and quality healthcare.

This new appreciation is deserved and we should enjoy it. But we can't assume that it will translate into good public policies. Because, unfortunately, the voices of anti-government ideologues are also stronger - and better funded - than ever before.

Increasingly, they have chosen to focus on legislative action and individual ballot initiatives across the states. With huge bankrolls, they can afford to pay for voters in state after state to hear propaganda and lies repeated over and over again, year after year.

Unfortunately, it's a strategy that's begun to pay off for them. To take just one example: after the Oklahoma State Legislature failed to pass a so-called "right-to-work" bill two years ago, anti-union forces turned it into a ballot initiative and launched a huge media campaign. The governor, his supporters, and a virtual "Who's-Who" in the Oklahoma corporate world all appeared in slick TV ads, claiming that a right-to-work law would bring high-paying jobs to the state - an outright lie.

The AFL-CIO, the AFT and other unions fought an uphill battle to defeat the initiative, which, ironically enough, we lost last September 24th - even as Oklahomans, like the rest of us, honored the nation's newest heroes - almost all of them union members and proud of it.

So you see what we're up against. And that's why we have proposed a new fund to help us fight these viciously anti-worker, anti-union campaigns. Because these campaigns aren't happening only in Oklahoma. Just in the past several years, a paycheck "deception" law was passed by referendum in Washington State, and by legislation in Michigan and Utah.

Voucher legislation was adopted in Florida, while, in Illinois, a law on tuition tax credits was passed – as was legislation to limit the collective bargaining rights of Chicago teachers and community college employees.

In Pennsylvania, a school takeover law has paved the way for the privatization of dozens of Philadelphia schools.

We fought back voucher initiatives in California and in Michigan, but we expect new voucher or paycheck deception initiatives in California, Florida, Michigan, and Oregon – and we already have one that was introduced for Washington, DC the day the Supreme Court decision was announced. Let me take a few minutes to say something about vouchers in light of that ruling.

First of all, it was a BAD ruling. And vouchers are BAD public policy – for education, for children, and for our tradition of religious freedom and tolerance.

We will continue to fight them. But if vouchers are enacted, we will also go all out to make sure that voucher schools don't get the free ride they've gotten up to now.

We'll fight to make ANY voucher school subject to the same transparency, the same testing and accountability provisions, and the same evaluations that all schools funded with public tax dollars are.

We won't stand for achievement reports or audits that follow a different set of rules -- reported to the public by Arthur Andersen or anyone else.

We'll continue to insist that ANY school that gets taxpayer dollars plays by the same rules as public schools do.

As you know, under the new ESEA legislation, all schools -- and not just Title I schools -- will have to make a set amount of academic progress each year and report all sorts of information to the public, not just on average but broken down by race, ethnicity, economic background, etc. According to the U.S. Department of Education, that's because -- and I quote -- "Parents and the public have a right to know how their tax dollars are being spent in the education system."

Well, if that's what applies to all public schools, then that's what should apply to private schools that get public funds, too. And if they refuse to be held accountable -- they must not get public dollars to educate our children.

Because this is supposed to be about the children. About improving their education. So let the same bright light that now shines on public schools now also fall on charter and voucher schools. And let's see if they can take the heat.

My friends, we face enormous challenges.

Our good work, our commitment, and even gratitude from our fellow citizens can't guarantee that our jobs will continue, or continue to support our families - with adequate healthcare, fair compensation, decent working conditions, and a secure retirement. If we want those things for ourselves and our families, we have to be able to take up the fight wherever necessary - at the bargaining table, in the mayor's office, in the state legislature, with the governor, and in the halls of the United States Congress.

That's why, two years ago, the Futures Committee focused on the importance of political action and why we have proposed this new solidarity fund, which you will have a chance to discuss and vote on tomorrow. I urge you - I strongly urge you - to support it.

As a longtime local leader, I know that during a time of economic downturn, when budgets are being squeezed, a dues increase is tough to do. But it is something that we absolutely MUST do if we want to be participants - not bystanders - in the decisions that affect not just us and our future, but the character of this nation.

You know, Al Shanker used to tell a story about the 1968 presidential election between Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon. Just weeks before the election, Al asked the UFT delegate assembly to

endorse Humphrey. He got booed and voted down, even though he was a very popular UFT president at the time.

He said that it wasn't that the members supported Nixon over Humphrey; they just didn't want the union to be involved in politics. They wanted him to stick to bread and butter issues. Within a year, though, these same members had discovered that their whole contract and job security and everything else depended on the governor and the state legislature - in other words - on politics. As Al used to say, "We now know that politics are as essential to our well-being as any contract we ever negotiated or any grievance we ever handled."

There's no question that our union - like our nation - is in for some difficult days ahead. But there's also no doubt at all in my mind that if we persevere and continue to strengthen the union, we will prevail.

Which brings me back to the extraordinary work of the AFT.

This is a unique organization – a union of professionals that fought for and won collective bargaining – in other words, voice and dignity – for public employees, starting with the first teacher contract in New York City; a union with a long, proud history of being able to deliver on the bread and butter issues AND professional issues.

We are a union that is committed to helping members develop their skills, advance their careers, and strengthen the institutions in which they work. We are committed to helping members improve not just the quality of their own lives, but the lives of the people they serve.

That is why AFT Healthcare is at the forefront of the fight to ban mandatory overtime for nurses and to establish workload limits for all healthcare workers. Common sense tells us – and new research confirms – that this is a policy that saves lives.

Unfortunately, in today's healthcare environment, it is the bottom line and not common sense or decency that usually prevails. Our Healthcare members in New Jersey recently pioneered a state law to stop the dangerous practice of forced overtime, and many others are pursuing a similar course. Meanwhile, at the federal level, we will continue to push for legislation to help limit healthcare workloads and protect the lives of ALL patients in ALL states.

Similarly, the Higher Ed division is fighting to make sure that the people who run our colleges and universities remember that higher education is a public good, not just a private benefit.

Across the country, colleges are trying to cut corners in ways that undermine students' education, as well as the rights and benefits of faculty members. We see serious attempts to destroy tenure, eliminate full-time jobs, and reduce the role of professional educators in academic decision-making. In response, we are continuing to oppose employer policies that elevate profit over learning; exploit temporary, part-time and graduate-student workers; weaken tenure; appropriate the intellectual property rights of faculty; and disregard educational quality in decisions regarding electronic instruction.

AFT's Public Employee division is continuing to mount campaigns to improve the quality of service. But quality is not the agenda of the many politicians who have returned to a favorite theme - running against the very government they seek to lead. Indeed, they campaign on promises to cut jobs and eliminate public services or to privatize services and hand tax dollars over to the private sector. Certainly, like every other part of the economy, some government institutions have problems with waste and inefficiency. But, unlike the private sector, public agencies - and their employees - receive systematic monitoring and oversight.

And that's a good thing. Just look at Enron! And WorldCom – and whatever big corporation is in the paper today...

The AFT's unique history has also propelled the PSRP division into a similar leadership role - a fight for standards, clear and reasonable certification requirements, and professional development

opportunities. And at the same time, we're fighting low wages, inept management practices, and inappropriate job assignments that often cross the border into exploitation. This is as true for bus drivers and food service workers and custodians and secretaries as it is for aides and classroom paraprofessionals.

And in fact, it was the AFT's long record of standing up for standards in hiring, training, and work assignments - and for doing what works to raise the achievement of poor kids - that gave us enough credibility to stop PSRP jobs from being eliminated in Title I.

Which brings me to the state of public education...

Brothers and sisters, let me state it plainly: The public schools of America are not failing. In fact, the vast majority of our schools and the children in them are flourishing.

The power of public schools to nurture - and realize - the dreams we have for our children was brought home to me - literally - just a few weeks ago, when my niece Marcy graduated from Brooklyn College, my alma mater. Marcy had a tough childhood. Her mother, a high school dropout, died of ovarian cancer when Marcy was just 14. Her father, my brother - also a high school dropout and a hard-working telephone wire technician - struggled with the awesome responsibility of raising a family alone.

But on this day, on the sun-filled lawns of Brooklyn College, there was nothing but sheer joy.

On this same campus, I - as the first and only member of my family to attend college - had found my way into civil rights and literature and art, into the world really... And, on that day, I saw my life mirrored all around me. Not just in Marcy, but in the many faces of Brooklyn today. All around me were families in festive dress. They were overwhelmingly people of color, with many a Caribbean or Latino lilt, and also included first-generation Eastern Europeans, Asians, and lots of families like mine - whose grandparents came to America for the very same reasons these new immigrants did: a better life for their children and grandchildren.

And here was proof, my friends, amidst balloons and cameras and camcorders and of course - cell phones - that America and its public schools still fulfill these dreams.

It's worth thinking about how those young men and women in caps and gowns got there. About their own perseverance - studying and holding down jobs at the same time. About their parents' love and support. And about the public schools - the overcrowded, under-funded, beleaguered, and much-berated public schools - that were there for them every step of the way.

As they are there for our kids in every city, town, and suburb across this great country.

So, I say again, our public schools are not failing.

They are not the "disaster" that some politicians and pundits - right and left - irresponsibly and carelessly paint them to be.

In fact, our schools continue to be the glue that holds this great and diverse democracy together.

And there is no one who knows them or believes in them or loves them more than I do. So I can also say this: Just as they work so well for so many - including many poor children - we must make sure they work well for ALL children. And right now, that still isn't the case.

Because too many poor and minority children just aren't achieving as well as they can and should. We've been working to fix this for a long time now. And we are making progress. Standards are higher, more students are taking more rigorous courses, achievement is up, and an increasing number of graduates are going on to higher education or technical schools or good jobs... But, like me, those of you sitting out there who know schools know that too many that serve poor kids just aren't equipped to overcome the host of problems that so many of these students bring with them. That is what the AFT, including our locals and state affiliates, has been fighting so hard to fix...

As you know, Congress has reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. This law, with all of its faults (both old and new), is an integral part of our educational fabric. This wasn't always the case. And I want to take a few minutes to talk about this...

In the 1960s, AFT and its allies fought hard for a federal role in what was, until then, almost a completely local and state-funded school system. It was then, for the first time in American history, that substantial federal funds began to make their way into public schools. The AFT fought to target the needs of poor children - to have the money used to provide extra instruction, support from paraprofessionals, and smaller class sizes. And, despite the claims of opponents, these funds have made a big difference for the schools - and the children in them.

But the difference wasn't big enough, in light of the new demands of the information age. Progress had to be ACCELERATED.

So in 1994, the Clinton administration tried to rewrite the law in the context of the standards movement - then being led by Al Shanker and the AFT. That 1994 reauthorization - with all its headaches and highlights - is the one we've been living with. Its requirement that Title I schools raise scores or suffer consequences has been a special challenge - but one that has been met by many AFT states and locals that struggled to respond constructively.

Some of them adopted the AFT's program for Redesigning Schools to Raise Achievement; some implemented the AFT's program to improve beginning reading instruction based on new research; and many used AFT materials to initiate proven practices and reform programs that work. And the AFT fought for greater resources at every level.

There is no question that our constructive efforts paid off. After years of indifference, attention refocused on the education of poor children and the inequities perpetrated on the schools they attend - from crumbling buildings and large class sizes to poor pay and the shortage of qualified teachers. And in more places than I can name - places like California's ABC District, Baltimore, Boston, Cleveland and Toledo, D.C., Hartford, Houston, and New York City - headlines about failing schools were replaced by articles about rising achievement and schools that work.

And it was all thanks to you.

I know very well that the new standards-based Title I, and the standards movement in general, has taken a tremendous toll on you, on our members...

You were working hard already, and you had to work even harder. You were given new standards, often vague, but no curricula to guide you. We still don't have them.

Instead, we got lots of new tests, and you were given the message that the test should BE the curriculum - and then the blame for narrowing the curriculum and teaching to the tests. And while some of the new tests were better, most of them weren't even aligned with the standards to which you were supposed to teach.

I know, too, that often, you didn't even get the test results, or got them in an instructionally useless fashion - usually getting them so late that the students these results were supposed to help you teach better were no longer in your classrooms.

I also know your frustration, and so deeply share it, that while the increased focus on testing has sometimes led to extra supports for struggling students, the resources for such interventions are still inadequate, and the work still falls primarily on you.

And I certainly understand, and share, your anger that tests are so often misused and abused. Instead of tests being used as a tool to give teachers, parents, and the public an accurate analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of our students and schools; instead of being used to get help where it's needed and change where change is needed; instead of, in other words, the kind of testing and accountability we support; we've seen too many instances of testing being misused and abused to cloud the true picture of our schools and to unfairly punish them.

In short, I understand all too well that lots of the promises made by the standards movement, including the PREVIOUS ESEA, were broken - and that the current fiscal crisis in the states is breaking them even further. And I know that you - and almost you alone - kept up your end of the bargain, and, notwithstanding all the problems you faced, and continue to face, kept faith with the AFT vision of high standards and you delivered for our children.

Which brings me to the latest reauthorization of ESEA.

There is no question that there are serious problems in this law, and I fully understand why our members fear that life will get even harder and less fair than it's already been. We are not alone in this perception. Most of the chief state school officers and governors from both parties, to name just two groups, worry that life will be tougher for them, too. We will talk about some of those problems - and the fight we are making to solve them - more extensively, at the preK-12 divisional meeting.

But here I want to have a candid political discussion with you, because some elements are fueling legitimate concerns into a panic that's distorting what happened and jeopardizing what can happen to solve these problems.

Simply put, this reauthorization was like no other we've seen.

First, Title I, for the first time since its inception, was in danger of elimination - not a cut but elimination. For a time, it looked like the only way to avoid that fate or some of the ugly proposals being made was to let the law expire and try again later. But "later" meant that things could get even uglier and, at best, Title I funding would be dramatically cut, because the economic downturn that's now slashing funding for education and every other vital service was already upon us. We could see what was ahead, and there was no way our schools could sustain that kind of hit.

The fact that we have Title I at all, let alone an increase this year over what was proposed, is a major achievement, and we can't lose sight of it.

Second, the political ingredients that went into this compromise law were also very new. Remember, the law was passed with an overwhelmingly bipartisan vote in both the House and the Senate. The problems as well as the pluses were bipartisan. Support for the re-testing of veteran teachers and the elimination of paraprofessionals in Title I, for instance, was just as likely to come from a liberal

Democrat as from a conservative Republican. Vouchers and other forms of privatization were backed by so-called New Democrats, as well as conservative Republicans.

Brothers and sisters, in this alliance-shifting, hard-line, often toxic atmosphere, we can be proud of the constructive role the AFT played and the good we did. Together with our allies, we defeated vouchers in both the House and Senate. And with the recent Supreme Court decision, we'll have to do it again.

We defeated the re-testing of veteran teachers.

We prevented the elimination of paraprofessionals in Title I.

We stopped major block grants, and we kept funds targeted on the neediest kids.

And, as I already mentioned, we substantially increased the funding for Title I this year over what was proposed, thanks to the leadership of Senator Kennedy.

But we couldn't do it all. As Al used to say to us about the contracts he negotiated: I could have written a better one myself, but I couldn't because there was another side across the table. And in the case of Title I, that immovable side was, as I said, comprised of traditional friends and foes alike.

So we have some pain to deal with, such as looming fights over the definition of teacher quality and paraprofessional qualifications; over choice provisions and supplemental services to youngsters in schools the law identifies as failing.

And then there's the presently unworkable formula for Adequate Yearly Progress – which we have been working hard to fix.

I can promise you this: we will fight to set these problems right.

But there are some things I want you to remember as we go forward to fix what is wrong in this law: the fact that it remains the single most important source of federal funding for our disadvantaged children; that, for all its problems, it still represents a major and hard-fought federal commitment to education that many on the right would like to see converted into vouchers or disappear altogether; and the fact that its basic framework, enacted in 1994, of standards-based reform is one that AFT pioneered; and that it remains vitally important to securing a future for our students and our schools.

It's a case, my friends, of not throwing out the baby with the bath water; of keeping before us our vision of what needs to be done and fighting intelligently - and fighting like hell - for it.

And so now I'd like to turn - or rather return - to the subject of the achievement gap and some things that need to be done to improve the education of poor children.

Thanks to some good new national and international studies, there is a new chance to get a more honest discussion about how poverty affects student achievement. What our early childhood teachers have always known has now been documented, not as an "excuse," but as a fact: when most poor children enter kindergarten, they are already behind their peers...

We also know that, contrary to myth, once they are in school, they progress as fast as more advantaged children do.

But a gap remains, and may even widen. And mainly for two reasons. First, although poor children make huge strides during kindergarten, other children are not standing still - which is good - so the gap doesn't completely close.

Second, poor children, unlike other children, fall back academically when they are OUT of school, chiefly in the summer. It's called summer learning loss, and it's also something teachers already knew about.

So, for children who start with a disadvantage, it's necessary to dramatically ACCELERATE the pace of their learning, or they'll never catch up. This is a huge task, especially given the long-term lack of adequate resources in poor schools and districts.

That's why, when the White House proposes -- and Congress does NOT oppose -- a budget for next year that fails to keep the promise of this year's, our children's future is jeopardized.

When cities and states slash summer schools, as they are doing across the country - instead of expanding and improving them - they are fostering the achievement gap.

When politicians fail to make provision for early childhood education or even full-day kindergarten for every disadvantaged youngster, they are not being serious about closing that gap.

When they fail to invest in poor neighborhoods and help poor families with job training, childcare, and healthcare, they are undermining the progress our schools are making...

And then they turn around and blame our schools?

When politicians support paycheck deception and other anti-union measures - even though unions are the best vehicle for increasing the wealth of working people - they are hurting working families and their children. And no one has to take the word of a union president about that. The research REPEATEDLY shows that achievement goes up as family income goes up. What a surprise!

We have never shied away from criticism of low-performing schools. In fact, we've led the efforts to improve them. And doing so must remain part of the national strategy for closing the achievement gap. But when elected leaders expect overcrowded, under-staffed, and underfunded schools to make up for every failure of society, and then attack us for failing, they are being disingenuous at best, and dishonest at worst.

More importantly, they are hurting our kids and risking our future as a just and peaceful society.

Last year, at our QuEST conference, I called for a major leap in the right direction - universal access to high quality preschool, especially for poor children. I also talked about making rich and enriching summer school experiences available for all poor children.

We are continuing to work on this, finding allies to support the expansion and improvement of Head Start and summer school, despite the recent setback of summer school cuts. Many of our affiliates are doing similar work.

Building support for a universal system of early childhood education is particularly hard, especially in today's economy. But it is something that must happen - and, I believe, eventually will.

This year, I'd like to propose an important step in this direction, a down payment, if you will – KINDERGARTEN PLUS.

I call on the federal government to help states and districts to provide disadvantaged children with the opportunity to start kindergarten during the summer months BEFORE they would ordinarily enter, and then to stay on through the summer BEFORE they will enter first grade.

Just that extra 4-6 months of being readied for school by our extraordinary kindergarten teachers, who are already so substantially closing a large pre-kindergarten gap, could make a big difference in the lives of our poorest children. It will accelerate their early education, socialization and well-being, and can help make sure that they don't enter first grade with as large a disadvantage.

The focus must be on the neediest children, which also means this is financially doable. The schools are already there; many or most of them already have kindergarten, and there is a pool of fabulous, QUALIFIED kindergarten teachers who will be more than willing to participate -- under appropriately negotiated arrangements, of course.

There is no question that this is something we can do right now - even in an economic downturn - to help reduce the achievement gap. There's no excuse not to.

Now, we know that schools alone, even at their best, cannot inoculate children FULLY against the effects of poverty and other social ills. But if our public schools are available for quality early learning and for rich summer- and after-school experiences, they can and will make an even GREATER difference than they already do in educating poor children and enriching their lives.

And when we fund our schools to be able to do what works for children, the children - and public education - will FULLY succeed!

And finally, I promise you that AFT will continue to fight hard for the resources our members and the children and adults they serve need for success.

We'll continue to oppose the tax cuts that are slashing needed public services.

And despite the recent decision by the Supreme Court, we will continue to fight vouchers.

We'll continue to fight the privatization of public schools, public services and Social Security, and the voucherizing of Medicare.

We'll continue to fight for quality health care for the uninsured and prescription drugs for the elderly....

...and for quality public education, which helped make this nation the strongest, most pluralistic democracy on earth!

And, in this very changed world, at a time of fear and uncertainty, when once solid ground feels unsteady beneath our feet, we know one thing for sure: This union, OUR union, will continue to fight to defend and extend the values we cherish, and to secure the wonderful future that our children and grandchildren deserve.

I promise you - we can, and we will prevail. Keep the union strong!

Final, July 10, 2002