



THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESIDENT
GEORGE W. BUSH

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Vice President's Remarks on Iraq and the War on Terror

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THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, thank you all very much. (Applause.) Thank you. Well, thank you very much and thank you for the warm welcome. It's great to be back at Heritage. In 2006 Heritage will mark its 33rd anniversary, and in all these years this has been one of the leading think tanks in the country. The Foundation has been a place of sound ideas, of intellectual leadership, and first-rate scholarship. Your standards have never wavered. You've made a tremendous contribution to the debate in this city and the nation. And you've earned the respect and the appreciation of all of us who are privileged to serve in public office.

As always when I pay a visit, I notice a number of old friends in the room. It's good to see all of you, and it looks like everybody pretty well recovered from their New Year's celebrations.

For my part, I came back to town on Sunday, after spending the holidays back home in Wyoming with Lynne and our family. Just prior to Christmas, as most of you know, I made a trip out to the Middle East, to Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Oman. Our plan was to make several other stops, as well. And then we got word that the Senate was headed for a close vote on the deficit reduction package, and that I might be needed to break a tie. Since breaking ties is about the only real job given me by the Constitution, I decided I'd better hurry back. (Laughter.) And it was worth it because my vote did turn out to be necessary. And the great thing about it is -- every time I vote, our side wins. (Laughter and applause.)



Even though we had to cut the trip a little short, it was a tremendous experience to go to the broader Middle East and to stand on the ground of two new democracies. In Afghanistan, we witnessed the first full session of their newly elected Parliament -- a significant event in any country, but one that was -- had special meaning in a nation that just over four years ago was in the grip of a cruel dictatorship. I met, as well, with one of the great men of the age, President Hamid Karzai, who has led his country with courage and character from day one. At Bagram Air Base outside Kabul, I received briefings on the ongoing efforts against the terrorists who still threaten the Afghan people, and had a chance to

thank the men and women stationed there. There's still tough fighting going on in Afghanistan, some of it in very rough terrain, high in the mountains and along border areas. Our people are getting the job done, together with coalition partners and an increasingly strong and professional Afghan military. And this young century is turning out to be a time of promise in Afghanistan -- with a stable democracy, a market economy, equality for women, and millions of children going to school for the very first time. It's impossible to overstate all that our coalition has achieved in Afghanistan -- and when our forces return home from that part of the world, they can be proud of the service they've rendered for the rest of their lives.

I was pleased to convey that message in person to our troops at Christmastime -- not just in Afghanistan, but in Iraq, as well. And on that leg of the journey, I stopped at Baghdad to see the President and the Prime Minister, went over to Taji Air Base, where Americans are training Iraqis, and finally to Al Asad Air Base, where our military's main staging ground is west of Baghdad. And here again, we see exemplary work by the men and women of our military, within an area of operations the size of Utah. They have scored daily victories -- even hourly victories. In the western Euphrates River valley, all the way up to the Syrian border, they have scored -- they've secured crossing points, destroyed enemy weapons caches, and cleared urban areas of terrorists.



Our coalition has also put tremendous effort into standing up the Iraqi security forces, and we've come a great distance over the past year. More and more, coalition forces have Iraqis at their side, helping to clear out terrorists, and then staying in the area to maintain the peace. We're helping build an Iraqi force that is sharp and well equipped, and this was vital to the success of last month's elections. There are over 100 Iraqi combat battalions fighting the terrorists, along with our forces today. More than a dozen military bases our coalition used to occupy have been turned back to the Iraqis. Gradually, Iraqi forces are taking control of more and more territory, and as they undertake further missions on their own, confidence is growing within the country and more intelligence tips are coming in from the Iraqi people themselves.

As the Iraqi army gains strength and experience, and as the political process advances, we'll be able to decrease troop levels without losing our capacity to defeat the terrorists. And as President Bush has made very clear, any decisions about troop levels will be driven by conditions on the ground and by the judgment of our commanders -- not by artificial timelines set by politicians here in Washington, D.C. (Applause.)

We will stand firmly with Iraq's leaders as they establish the institutions of a unified and a lasting democracy. On the political track, every benchmark has been met successfully -- starting with the turnover of sovereignty a year and a half ago, national elections last January, the drafting of the constitution last summer, and the ratification of that constitution by voters in October, and, of course, most recently, the election of a new government under that constitution in December. The political leaders of Iraq are steady. They're courageous, and the citizens, police and soldiers of that country

have proudly stepped forward as active participants and guardians in a new democracy -- running for office, speaking out, voting and sacrificing for their country. When I met with Prime Minister Jaafari in Baghdad, he pointed the voter turnout figures for the national elections, three of them in 2005 -- around 59 percent in January, some 63 percent in October, and approximately 70 percent turnout in December. Iraqi citizens have done all of this despite threats from terrorists who offer no political agenda for Iraq's future, and wage a campaign of mass slaughter against the Iraqi people themselves, the vast majority of whom are fellow Muslims.

Day after day, month after month, Iraqis have proven their determination to live in freedom, to chart their own destiny, and to defend their country. And they can know that the United States will keep our commitment to them. We will continue the work of reconstruction. Our forces will keep going after the terrorists, and continue training the Iraqi military, so that Iraqis can eventually take the lead in their country's security and our men and women can come home. We will succeed in this mission, and when it is concluded, we will be a safer country here in the United States, as well.

As always, the people of our armed forces are the ones at the tip of the spear. And we are not a country that takes its military for granted. We are a democracy, defended by volunteers who deserve all the tools and all the support we can provide them. Americans appreciate every man and woman who goes out on long deployments, endures the hardship of separation from home and family, fellow citizens who wear heavy armor when the thermometer hits 125 degrees, work seven days a week, often 14,16,18 hours a day. We stand in total admiration when we learn of soldiers, airmen, Marines, and Navy corpsmen that expose themselves to heavy fire to assist wounded comrades, or when we learn of a lance corporal who came on a burning vehicle with an unconscious Marine inside -- with his bare hands he tore open the air conditioner assembly so he could pull his comrade to safety. The people in our military today are some of the bravest men and women this nation has ever produced. (Applause.)

Lately our forces in Iraq have been receiving some mixed signals out of Washington, and they might have been wondering whether America has what it takes to stay in the fight. I assured them that the American people do not support a policy of passivity, resignation, or defeatism in the face of terror. If we have learned anything in the last 25 years -- from Beirut, to Somalia, to the USS Cole -- it is that terrorist attacks are not caused by the projection of force; they are invited by the perception of weakness. And this nation made a decision: We will never go back to the false comforts of the world before September 11th, 2001. We will engage these enemies with the goal of victory. And with the American military in the fight, that victory is certain. (Applause.)

The President and I believe that the victory of freedom in Afghanistan and Iraq will be an inspiration to democratic reformers in other lands. In the broader Middle East and beyond, America will continue to encourage free institutions, individual liberty, and tolerance because these are the ideas and the aspirations that overcome ideologies of terror and violence and can turn societies to the pursuit of peace. And as the peoples of that region experience new hope, progress, and control over their own lives, we will see the power of freedom to change our world and a terrible threat will be removed from the lives of our children and our grandchildren.

Wartime conditions are, in every case, a test of military skill and national resolve. But this is especially true in the war on terror. Four years ago, President Bush told Congress and the country that the path

ahead would be difficult, that we were heading into a long struggle, unlike any we have ever known. All this has come to pass. We have faced, and are facing today, enemies who hate us, who hate our country, and who hate the liberties for which we stand. They dwell in the shadows, wear no uniform, and have no regard for the laws of warfare, and feel unconstrained by any standard of morality. We've never had a fight like this -- and those of us in positions of responsibility have a duty to wage a broad-scale effort for the sake of the nation's freedom and our security.

That effort includes a home front, with a great deal of urgent and difficult work and needed to persevere. In his speech to Congress after 9/11, President Bush said that the United States would, and I quote, "direct every resource at our command -- every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war -- to the disruption and to the defeat of the global terror network." The Congress of the United States backed him up in full, authorizing the President to defeat an enemy that had already slipped into our country and waged a horrific attack that killed 3,000 innocent, unsuspecting men, women, and children on 9/11.

The President also signed the Patriot Act, which removed the artificial barrier that used to exist between law enforcement and intelligence, and gave federal officials the ability to pursue terrorists with the tools they already use against drug traffickers and other kinds of criminals. There was no need for a tie-breaking vote on the Patriot Act, because the Senate passed it 98 to one. (Applause.)

That law has helped us to disrupt terrorist activity, to break up terror cells within the United States, and to protect the lives of Americans. We look forward to a renewal of the Patriot Act in 2006, because that law has done exactly what it was intended to do, and this country cannot afford to be without its protections.

Another vital step the President took in the days following 9/11 was to authorize the National Security Agency to intercept a certain category of terrorist-linked international communications. There are no communications more important to the safety of the United States than those related to al Qaeda that have one end in the United States. If we'd been able to do this before 9/11, we might have been able to pick up on two hijackers who subsequently flew a jet into the Pentagon. They were in the United States, communicating with al Qaeda associates overseas. But we did not know they were here plotting until it was too late.

If you recall, the report of the 9/11 Commission focused criticism on our inability to cover links between terrorists at home and terrorists abroad. The authorization the President made after September 11th helped address that problem in a manner that is fully consistent with the constitutional responsibilities and legal authority of the President and with the civil liberties of the American people. The activities conducted under this authorization have helped to detect and prevent possible terrorist attacks against the American people. As such, this program is critical to the national security of the United States.

It's important to note that leaders of Congress have been briefed more than a dozen times on the President's authorization, and on activities conducted under it. I have personally presided over most of those briefings. In addition, the entire program undergoes a thorough review within the executive branch approximately every 45 days. After each review, the President determines whether to

reauthorize the program. He has done so more than 30 times since September 11th -- and he has indicated his intent to do so as long as our nation faces a continuing threat from al Qaeda and similar organizations.

The existence of this program was highly classified, and information about it was improperly provided to the news media, to the clear detriment of our national security. There will now be a spirited debate about whether this program is necessary and appropriate, and the position of our administration will remain clear and consistent. Number one, these actions taken are necessary. Number two, these actions are totally appropriate and within the President's authority under the Constitution and laws of the country. Number three, this wartime measure is limited in scope to surveillance associated with terrorists; it is carefully conducted; and the information obtained is used strictly for national security purposes. And number four, the civil liberties of the American people are unimpeded by these actions.

Let me dwell on that last point for a minute. I was in Washington in the 1970s, at a time when there was great and legitimate concern about civil liberties and about potential abuses within the executive branch. I had the honor of serving as White House Chief of Staff to President Ford, and that experience shapes my own outlook to this very day.

Serving immediately after a period of turmoil, all of us in the Ford administration worked hard to restore people's confidence in the government. We were adamant about following the law and protecting civil liberties of all Americans, and we did so. Three decades later, I work for a President who shares those same values. He has made clear from the outset, both publicly and privately, that our duty to uphold the law of the land admits no exceptions in wartime. The President himself put it best: He said, "We are in a fight for our principles, and our first responsibility is to live by them."

The American people can be certain that we are upholding those principles. They can be equally certain that our administration will continue to defend this nation to the very best of our ability. As we get farther away from September 11th, some in Washington are yielding to the temptation to downplay the ongoing threat to our country, and to back away from the business at hand. This is perhaps a natural impulse, as time passes and alarms don't sound. All of us are grateful that our nation has gone four years and four months without another 9/11. Obviously, no one can guarantee that we won't be hit again. But neither should anyone say that the relative safety of the last four years was an accident. America has been protected not by luck but by sensible policy decisions, by decisive action at home and abroad, and by round-the-clock efforts on the part of people in law enforcement, intelligence, the military, and homeland security.

The enemy that struck on 9/11 is weakened and fractured yet it is still lethal and trying to hit us again. Either we are serious about fighting this war or we are not. And as long as George W. Bush is President of the United States, we are serious -- and we will not let down our guard. (Applause.)

All of us know that crucial debates lie ahead, just as we know that the New Year will bring its own set of challenges to our nation. And when those challenges come, America will have the resources, the resolve, and the character to meet them all. The more you know about this country, and the more you travel and see what we've been able to achieve in this troubled world, you cannot help but grow in optimism, and, yes, in pride, as well.

On the final day of that trip abroad last month, we visited Pakistan. After meeting with President Musharraf, our delegation boarded the helicopters and headed to the earthquake-stricken area, in the foothills of the Himalayas in northern Pakistan. On the ground below, across some of the most rugged territory you've ever laid eyes on, were the remnants of entire villages that were utterly destroyed in a 7.6 earthquake that killed upwards of 70,000 people. After that quake hit, President Bush ordered units of our military to go in and help, and within 48 hours Americans were on the scene, and had begun airlifting thousands of tons of equipment and supplies.

It was up in those mountains that the U.S. Army set up a MASH unit, a mobile hospital, with sophisticated medical supplies, military physicians, nurses, and physician assistants, and even some volunteer doctors from the United States. Lynne and I went to that tent village. And I can tell you, it's quite a feeling to stand in the remotest hinterlands and see the American flag, and citizens of our country giving aid to the desperate, including medical care to some people who had never seen a doctor before in their entire lives.

These are extraordinary accomplishments -- and yet they are so typical of Americans -- and so very much in the spirit of our country. The United States is a good, a decent and a generous land. We are a nation that believes in ideals, upholds them in our own country, and acts on them in the world beyond. From providing more global food aid, by far, than any other nation, to supporting life-saving treatments for hundreds of thousands of Sub-Saharan Africans living with HIV/AIDS, to standing with freedom-loving peoples in the struggle against tyranny and terror, we are doing great good in this world. And in 2006 and beyond, we will do even more as we serve humanity and justice, individual dignity, the rights of mankind, and the cause of liberty.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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