



For Immediate Release
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President Bush Attends Division Review Ceremony

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

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10:54 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: I want to thank you for the warm welcome to Fort Bragg. It is good to be at the home of the Airborne and Special Operation Forces. This is my fourth visit to Fort Bragg since I have been honored to be the President. Somehow I always find my way back to the "center of the universe." (Applause.) And every time I come, I look forward to saying: Hooah!

AUDIENCE: Hooah!

THE PRESIDENT: I'm pleased to be with the paratroopers of the All American 82nd Airborne Division. You know, you and my dad have something in common: You both enjoy jumping out of airplanes. (Laughter.) He's jumped with the Golden Knights of Fort Bragg six times. Dad is America's only skydiving President -- and that's a distinction he's going to keep, as far as I'm concerned. (Laughter.) Speaking of which, he has a message for all of you -- those of you jumping tomorrow: "Airborne, all the way!" (Applause.)



This is the first time since 2006 that five brigades from your division have assembled together. Most of you recently returned from extended 15-month deployments to the front lines in Afghanistan and Iraq. We've asked a lot of you. You've achieved difficult objectives in a new kind of war. You've performed with skill and valor. And on behalf of a grateful nation: Welcome home. (Applause.)

I thank General Dave Rodriguez for his service to our country. I thank Pete Geren, Secretary of the Army, for joining us today. I appreciate Brigadier General Art Bartell, Colonel Victor Petrenko. I want to thank Sergeant Major Tom Capel. I'm honored to be here with the military families. I particularly want to say hello to Maureen McNeill, wife of General Dan McNeill. I know he'll be pleased that I recognized you here at this event when I see him. (Laughter.)

I want to thank all the families of the paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division who are here today. I welcome the families of the fallen heroes here today. It's such an honor to see the veterans of the 82nd Airborne Division, and other veterans who have joined us today.

I want to pay a special tribute to the Wounded Warriors from the 82nd Airborne. Thank you for your courage. (Applause.)

I welcome the state and local elected officials and members of the Fort Bragg community. Thank you for supporting these troops.

Looking out on the units this morning, I see why the 82nd Airborne is known as "America's Guard of Honor." In your ranks, I see the strength of the greatest military the world has ever known. And in the families of Fort Bragg, I see the love and support that makes your service possible. The United States of America owes our troops in uniform a debt of gratitude, and we owe our military families the strong support necessary to make sure that they understand that we appreciate their sacrifices.

Every trooper in the 82nd is a triple volunteer. You volunteered to join the Army. You volunteered to attend jump school. And you volunteered to undertake some of our military's most difficult missions by joining this elite division. Each of you is proud to wear the All American patch of the 82nd -- and I am incredibly proud to be the Commander-in-Chief of such noble, courageous men and women. (Applause.)

As members of the 82nd Airborne Division, you belong to a storied military tradition. When allied forces landed in Normandy, the paratroopers of the 82nd were among the first boots on the ground. When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, this division was among the first units to deploy to Operation Desert Shield. When our nation announced that the 82nd Airborne was flying toward Haiti in 1994, the country's oppressive leader began to make plans to fly out. Across the world, the 82nd has come to represent the vanguard of freedom -- and we salute all the brave veterans with us today who have ever marched in your ranks. (Applause.)

At the beginning of a new century, the men and women of the 82nd Airborne have once again stepped forward to advance the cause of liberty. Since the attacks of 9/11, you have deployed on more missions than any other division in the United States Army. You've taken the battle to the terrorists abroad -- so we do not have to face them here at home. (Applause.) And you've shown the enemies of freedom that the 82nd Airborne will never give any ground, and will always fight "all the way." (Applause.)

From the front lines in Afghanistan, we welcome home the 4th Brigade Combat Team -- which brought "Fury from the Skies" to America's enemies. (Applause.) We welcome home units of the Combat Aviation Brigade -- which flew on "Pegasus Wings." We welcome home your Division Headquarters, your Special Troops Battalion, your commander, Major General Dave Rodriguez -- "All American Six." (Applause.)

During your deployment in Afghanistan, you served under NATO Commander and longtime Fort Bragg resident, General Dan McNeill. Under his leadership, and because of your courage, you took the fight

to the enemy. And thanks to you, the Taliban no longer controls the Sangin Valley. And thanks to you, the Taliban's stronghold in the town of Musa Qala has fallen -- and a flag of a free Afghanistan has risen. Thanks to you, hundreds of insurgents have been captured in eastern Afghanistan; many others have been killed. And thanks to you, a nation where al Qaida once plotted the attacks of 9/11 is now a democracy and an ally in the war against these extremists. (Applause.)

From the front lines in Iraq, we welcome home the "Falcons" of the 2nd Brigade, the "Panthers" of the 3rd Brigade, the "Providers" of the 82nd Sustainment Brigade, and units of the Combat Aviation Brigade. (Applause.)

When Operation Iraqi Freedom began, members of the 82nd Airborne helped remove Saddam Hussein from power. The decision to remove Saddam Hussein was the right decision at the time -- and it remains the right decision today. (Applause.)

With Saddam gone, our job was to help the Iraqi people defend themselves against the extremists and to build a free society. In 2006, that mission was faltering. I knew victory was essential to our security. So we implemented a new strategy. Instead of retreating, we sent in more troops. And the first troops in as part of that surge were the troops of the Falcon Brigade of the 82nd Airborne. (Applause.) Together with the Panther Brigade and other units of the 82nd Airborne, you pursued the enemy in its strongholds, you denied the terrorists sanctuary, you brought security to neighborhoods that had been in the grip of terror. And across Iraq, violence is down, civilian deaths are down, sectarian killings are down, and attacks on American forces are down. You did the job we sent you to do. You have returned home on success. And all of America is proud of the 82nd Airborne. (Applause.)

When I was looking for a commander to lead the surge, I turned to a former commander in the 82nd Airborne -- General David Petraeus. He's done a brilliant job leading our troops in Iraq. And when it came time to name a new leader for Central Command, he was my first and only choice. The United States Senate must give him a fair hearing and they must confirm him as quickly as possible. (Applause.)

General Petraeus has reported that security conditions have improved enough in Iraq to return by the end of July to the pre-surge level of 15 combat brigade teams. So far three brigades, including the Falcon Brigade, have redeployed without replacement as part of this drawdown. Two more brigades will follow in the months ahead. When we complete this drawdown, we will have reduced our combat brigades in Iraq by 25 percent from the year before. General Petraeus and our commanders will continue to analyze the situation on the ground and report back to me with their recommendations for future troop levels. But my message to our commanders is this: You will have all the troops, you will have all the resources you need to win in Iraq. (Applause.)

Often I've been asked: What will success look like in Iraq? So I want to share some thoughts with you. Success will be when al Qaeda has no safe havens in Iraq and Iraqis can protect themselves. Success will be when Iraq is a nation that can support itself economically. Success will be when Iraq is a democracy that governs itself effectively and responds to the will of its people. Success will be when Iraq is a strong and capable ally in the war on terror. And when our country succeeds in Iraq, generations of Americans will be more secure.

The first condition for success in Iraq is a country that can protect its own people. The paratroopers gathered here have seen the Iraqis in action. They're brave people. They're courageous people. And with our training, they're becoming better soldiers. They're assuming greater responsibility for fighting the terrorists, and policing the streets, and defending their territory. And as a sign of their commitment to this mission, the government in Baghdad launched a surge of 100,000 new troops.

In Mosul and other areas in northern Iraq, Iraqi forces have launched operations to drive al Qaeda from one of its few remaining major strongholds in the country. In Basra and Sadr City, Iraqi forces have led operations to clear out Iranian-backed special groups, illegal militias and criminal gangs. The capability of the Iraqi security force is improving -- they're winning battles.

In this fight, they have been joined by about 100,000 Iraqis who belong to citizens groups bearing the proud name of "Sons of Iraq." Many of these groups are Sunni, some are Shia, some are mixed. But whatever their makeup, these groups are determined to expel the enemies of freedom, and secure their communities and build a more hopeful future.

The enemies of free Iraq are determined to deny that future -- and that means we can expect more violence. We can also expect the Iraqi security forces to be better equipped, better trained, and better able to take the fight to the enemy. And as they do, they can count on the United States of America. (Applause.)

The second condition for success in Iraq is a country that can support itself economically. Iraq's economy has made tremendous strides since the beginning of the surge. Inflation is declining, economic growth is increasing, investment in the energy and telecom industries is increasing. Energy production is on the rise. Listen, there are many challenges that remain -- and there is work to be done to overcome decades of oppression and mismanagement. Yet Iraqis can take pride in the economic progress their country has made.

And they can take pride in the fact that they're paying a greater share of their own expenses. We provided critical help to Iraq early on. And now that the economy expands, the government in Baghdad has a solemn responsibility to invest in its people, pay for its infrastructure, and pay for its own security.

The third condition for success in Iraq is a democracy that governs itself effectively and responds to the will of its people. Security has improved, and Iraqis have realized they don't have to rely on militias or other extremists for protection. And they're taking a growing interest in their country's political future. In local communities, Iraqis are increasingly demanding reconciliation. They're demanding a better life for their families. In the provinces, the tribes that rose up to cast off al Qaeda now look forward to casting votes and rebuilding their neighborhoods.

And in Baghdad, the government is responding to these developments with an impressive string of legislative achievements. They passed a pension law, de-Baathification reform, a new budget, an amnesty law, a provincial powers law. And while there's still a distance to travel, they have come a long way. Their legislative accomplishments would be notable in any country. But they're even more impressive considering the conditions the Iraqis have had to overcome.

As we look ahead, we cannot expect Iraq to suddenly put aside all their political differences. Sometimes we have a few of our own in the United States. We can't expect them to reach agreement on every issue. But we can expect Iraqis of all backgrounds to take an increasingly active role in the democratic process, share power, and settle disputes by debating in the halls of government rather than fighting in the streets.

The fourth condition of success in Iraq is a country that is an ally in the war on terror. The people of Iraq have seen the dark vision the enemy offers -- they've rejected it. The Iraqis understand firsthand how the terrorists murder and maim with no respect for innocent life. It is no coincidence that a nation that has suffered mightily at the hands of terror is becoming a strong ally in the war against the terrorists.

And now the leaders of Iraq want to solidify their country's relationship with the United States. Last year, America and Iraq agreed to sign a long-term strategic partnership. This partnership would support future cooperation between our countries -- without establishing permanent bases, or without binding a future President to specific troop levels. Part of this agreement would provide legal protection for American troops in Iraq -- similar to those in other countries where our forces are deployed. And it would show our friends across the world that America will stand with them as they stand against terror.

The vision for success in Iraq that I just outlined will not come easily. There will be tough fighting ahead. But the progress is undeniable. Because of your bravery and your courage, the terrorists and extremists are on the run, and we are on our way to victory. (Applause.)

I know there have been some disagreements on the war on terror. But whatever -- wherever members of Congress stood on the decision to remove Saddam Hussein, we should be able to agree that our troops deserve America's full support. (Applause.) And that means the United States Congress needs to pass a responsible war funding bill that does not tie the hands of our commanders, and gives our troops everything they need to complete and accomplish the mission. (Applause.)

Some of our fellow citizens wonder whether the mission in Iraq is worth the cost. I strongly believe it is. And here is why: The enemy has made clear that Iraq is the central battleground of the great ideological struggle of our time. This is a struggle between those who murder the innocent to advance their hateful objectives and those of us who love liberty and long for peace. We saw that these enemies -- what these enemies intend for our country on September the 11th, 2001 -- and we must do everything in our power to stop the enemy from attacking us again.

Withdrawal from Iraq before we have achieved success would embolden al Qaeda and give them new safe havens from which to plot attacks on the American homeland. Withdrawal before success would embolden Iran in its nuclear weapons ambitions and its efforts to dominate the region. Withdrawal before success would send a signal to terrorists and extremists across the world that America is weak, and does not have the stomach for a long fight. Withdrawal before success would be catastrophic for our country. It would more likely -- be more likely that we would suffer another attack like the one we experienced on September the 11th. It would jeopardize the safety of future generations. And we must not, and we will not, allow that to happen. (Applause.)

By contrast, success in Iraq would deny al Qaeda safe haven and hand Osama bin Laden a strategic defeat in the land where his terrorist movement has chosen to make a stand. Success in Iraq would deal a devastating blow to Iran's ambitions to dominate the region. Success in Iraq would show the people of the Middle East that democracy and freedom can flourish in their midst. And success in Iraq would send a signal to the world that America does not withdraw, does not retreat, does not back down in the face of terror -- and that will make us safer here in the United States of America. (Applause.)

America is fortunate to have courageous men and women who volunteer to protect us during these dangerous times. We've seen that courage in the story of Sergeant First Class Benjamin Sebban of the 82nd Airborne. As a senior medic in his squadron, Ben made sacrifice a way of life. When younger medics were learning how to insert IVs, he would always offer up his own arm for practice. And when the time came, Ben did not hesitate to offer his fellow soldiers far more.

On March 17, 2007, in Diyala Province, Ben saw a truck filled with explosives racing toward his team of paratroopers. He ran out in the field to warn them, exposing himself to a blast. Ben received severe wounds -- but this good medic never bothered to check his own injuries. Instead, he devoted his final moments on Earth to treating others. This morning, it was such a great honor to be able to present Ben's mom the Silver Star.

We pray that a loving God comforts his family. We pray that a loving God comforts the families of all the fallen. We will always honor their memory. And we pledge that their sacrifice shall not be in vain. (Applause.)

Our mission in Iraq has been long and trying. But when the history books are written, they will show that this generation of heroes was as great as any in the history of our nation. They will show that America refused to shrink in the face of terror. They will show that freedom prevailed.

Thank you for who you are. Thank you for what you do. Yesterday, today and tomorrow, you are America's Guard of Honor. May God bless you, and may God bless America. (Applause.)

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