

knew that success in Iraq mattered greatly to the future prospects for peace in the Middle East, as well as having enormous impact on our own security. For all these reasons, they knew that tyranny in Iraq was worth defeating -- and democracy in Iraq worth defending.

We could have quit a year and a half ago -- and today Iraq would be in chaos. Al Qaeda would probably control large segments of the country; it probably would be a major safe haven for terrorists; and its people would be suffering in ways we can scarcely imagine. America's credibility would be in tatters, and the terrorists would be newly emboldened. And everybody in Washington would be wondering just how we were going to fix the problem in Iraq sometime down the road. Fortunately, we've prevented that nightmare scenario -- and now it's clear that the opponents of the troop surge were dead wrong.

Success in Iraq has allowed us to continue the President's policy of return-on-success. We've reduced the length of combat tours from 15 months back down to 12. We've brought home all five of the combat brigades and the three Marine units who were sent into Iraq as part of the surge. Further troop movements will, as always, depend on what is happening on the ground.

We recognize there are still difficult challenges ahead in Iraq and the rest of the Middle East -- including the efforts by the radical regime in Iran to develop technologies that would give it the capability to produce nuclear weapons. No one should have any illusions about this. Iran is the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism. Its leaders have repeatedly called for the death of America and the extermination of Israel. A nuclear-armed Iran would be a threat to our country's vital interests. The United States remains focused on mobilizing friends and allies to pressure the Iranian regime to accept a diplomatic solution, to comply with the U.N. Security Council resolutions, and to abandon its efforts to develop a nuclear weapons capability. Diplomacy will always be our preferred course. But Iran must know that the United States is determined to defend its interests, and that all options remain on the table.

Whether in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Iran, the people of our military understand what is at stake in the broader Middle East, and the consequences it holds for the war on terror. A few months ago, during a stay at Balad Air Base in Iraq, I participated in an awards ceremony, and was given the chance to address several thousand of our troops. The morale was high -- you could feel it as you stood there with them, and you could hear it as they cheered comrades receiving battle decorations. Most of all, I remember how strongly they applauded when I told them that we're going to get the job done right -- so that another generation of Americans doesn't have to come back and do it again. (Applause.)

At every stage, with all the changing fortunes of war, the members of our military have given their jobs all that is in them. They've seized the initiative; they have the guts and the determination to see the matter through. Last month in Iraq, more than 1,200 Americans coming to the end of their service obligation made the decision to re-enlist. On the Fourth of July, General Petraeus swore them in during a ceremony at Camp Victory. According to the sergeant major in Baghdad, it was the largest re-enlistment ceremony since the advent of the all-volunteer force. Our nation is grateful to each and every one of them. (Applause.)

As many of you know, I had the honor of serving this country as Secretary of Defense during the