

## President Holds Press Conference

Press Conference by the President  
The Rose Garden

11:15 A.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Good morning. After the 26,000-mile journey last week, I hope the members of the traveling press had a restful weekend. I have a brief statement; then I'll be glad to take questions.

On my trip to Asia, I had a series of very productive meetings with some of America's closest allies in the war on terror. Nations such as Australia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines are fighting terrorism in their own region. Their leaders understand the importance of our continuing work in Afghanistan and Iraq. Liberating the people of those nations from dictatorial regimes was an essential step in the war on terror. And the world is safer today because Saddam Hussein and the Taliban are gone. We're now working with many nations to make sure Afghanistan and Iraq are never again a source of terror and danger for the rest of the world.

Our coalition against terror has been strengthened in recent days by U.N. Security Council Resolution 1511. This endorses a multinational force in Iraq under U.S. command, encourages other nations to come to the aid of the Iraqi people.

Last week a donor conference in Madrid brought together more than 70 nations to discuss future contributions to Iraqi reconstruction. America appreciates the recent announcements of financial commitments to Iraq offered by many of the donors at the conference. After decades of oppression and brutality in Iraq and Afghanistan, reconstruction is difficult, and freedom still has its enemies in both of those countries. These terrorists are targeting the very success and freedom we're providing to the Iraqi people. Their desperate attacks on innocent civilians will not intimidate us, or the brave Iraqis and Afghans who are joining in their own defense and who are moving toward self-government.

Coalition forces aided by Afghan and Iraqi police and military are striking the enemy with force and precision. Our coalition is growing in members and growing in strength. Our purpose is clear and certain: Iraq and Afghanistan will be stable, independent nations and their people will live in freedom.

This essential goal in the war on terror requires continued American leadership, and the continued support of Congress. The House and the Senate are now considering my supplemental request for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Most of this money is for the safety and success of our military, for their pay, for their weapons, ammunition, body armor, vehicles, fuel and for every other resource they need to carry out their mission. Part of the money is for reconstruction -- from the training of Afghan and Iraqi police and military personnel to the building of schools and clinics. These funding requests are just as critical to the overall success in Iraq.

I commend the House and the Senate for approving the supplemental request. I urged both Houses of Congress to reach agreement soon on a final bill so these vital funds can go quickly to where they are needed.

I also asked Congress to move forward on elements of my agenda for growth and jobs. After the shocks of the stock market decline, recession, terrorist attack, and corporate scandals, our economy is showing signs abroad and gathering strength. America is starting to add new jobs. Retail sales are strong, business profits are increasing, the stock market has been advancing, housing construction is surging, and manufacturing production is rising. All of this can -- all of us can be optimistic about the future of the economy, but we cannot be complacent. I will not be satisfied until every American who is looking for work can find a job.

So I proposed additional measures to keep the economy on the path to greater job creation, taking action to control the rising cost of health care, protecting businesses from junk lawsuits by cutting needless and costly government regulations, by making permanent the tax cuts that have helped our economy.

One action Congress should take immediately is to pass a comprehensive energy bill, which I proposed more than two years ago. Our entire economy depends on steady, affordable supplies of energy. We must encourage conservation, promote



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efficient technology, modernize our electricity grid and increase energy production here at home.

In the closing months of this year, Congress should also complete the vital work of strengthening and modernizing Medicare. The best way to provide our seniors with modern medicine, including prescription drug coverage and better preventative care, is to give them more choices under Medicare. When seniors have options, health plans will compete for their business by offering better coverage at affordable price. American seniors are counting on these reforms. I look forward to signing them into law.

Finally, the United States Senate must step up to serious constitutional responsibilities. I've nominated many distinguished and highly-qualified Americans to fill vacancies on the federal, district and circuit courts. Because of a small group of senators is willfully obstructing the process, some of these nominees have been denied up or down votes for months, even years. More than one-third of my nominees for the circuit courts are still awaiting a vote. The needless delays in the system are harming the administration of justice and they are deeply unfair to the nominees, themselves. The Senate Judiciary Committee should give a prompt and fair hearing to every single nominee, and send every nomination to the Senate floor for an up or down vote.

Finally, of course, we are monitoring the fires in California. FEMA Director Brown is in the state. I express my deep concerns and sympathies for those whose lives have been hurt badly by these fires. The federal government is working closely with the state government to provide resources necessary to help the brave firefighters do their duty.

With that, I'll be glad to answer some questions, starting with Terry Hunt.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, you just spoke about the suicide bombers in Iraq as being desperate. But as yesterday's attack show, they're also increasingly successful and seem to be trying to send a warning to institutions like the police and the Red Cross not to cooperate with the United States. Has the United States been able to identify who's behind this surge of attacks, where they come from, and how to stop them?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. I think it's a very interesting point you make in your question, "they're trying to send a warning." Basically, what they're trying to do is cause people to run. They want to kill and create chaos. That's the nature of a terrorist, that's what terrorists do. They commit suicide acts against innocent people and then expect people to say, well, gosh, we better -- better not try to fight you anymore.

We're trying to determine the nature of who these people were. But I will tell you, I would assume that they're either, or, and probably both Baathists and foreign terrorists. The Baathists try to create chaos and fear because they realize that a free Iraq will deny them the excessive privileges they had under Saddam Hussein. The foreign terrorists are trying to create conditions of fear and retreat because they fear a free and peaceful state in the midst of the part of the world where terror has found recruits, that freedom is exactly what terrorists fear the most.

And so, as I said yesterday, we will not be -- I said today again, they're not going to intimidate America and they're not going to intimidate the brave Iraqis who are actively participating in securing the freedom of their country.

Steve.

Q Mr. President, if there are foreign terrorists involved, why aren't Syria and Iran being held accountable?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. Well, we're working closely with those countries to let them know that we expect them to enforce borders, prevent people from coming across borders, if, in fact, we catch them doing that. The coalition forces have stepped up border patrol efforts. There are now more Iraqis patrolling the border. We are mindful of the fact that some might want to come into Iraq to attack and to create conditions of fear and chaos, and that's why General Abizaid, in his briefing to me yesterday, talked about the additional troops we have on the borders. And that is why it is important that we step up training for Iraqis, border patrol agents, so they can enforce their own borders.

John.

Q Mr. President, thank you. As you know, the Chairman of the commission investigating the September 11th attacks wants documents from the White House, and said this week that he might have to use subpoena power. You have said there's some national security concerns about turning over some of those documents to people outside of the Executive Branch. Will you turn them over, or can you at least outline for the American people what you think is a reasonable compromise so that the commission learns what it needs to know, and you protect national security, if you think it's that important?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. It is important for me to protect national security. You're talking about the presidential daily brief. It's important for the writers of the presidential daily brief to feel comfortable that the documents will never be politicized and/or unnecessarily exposed for public purview. I -- and so, therefore, the kind of the first statements out of this administration were very protective of the presidential prerogatives of the past and to protect the right for other presidents, future presidents, to have a good presidential daily brief.

Now, having said that, I am -- we want to work with Chairman Kean and Vice-Chairman Hamilton. And I believe we can reach a proper accord to protect the integrity of the daily brief process and, at the same time, allow them a chance to take a look

and see what was in the -- certain -- the daily briefs that they would like to see.

Q Do you need to bring them here so that the chairman and vice-chairman can see them --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we're working out -- we're working out the procedures. My only point is I do want to be helpful to Chairman Kean and Lee Hamilton. These are men of integrity, they're people who understand the process. They know the importance of the presidential daily brief; they know the importance of the daily brief to future presidents. And, therefore, I think they will be mindful of the need to gather evidence and, at the same time, protect the capacity for presidents to get unfettered, real, good intelligence.

Nora.

Q Mr. President, if I may take you back to May 1st when you stood on the USS Lincoln under a huge banner that said, "Mission Accomplished." At that time you declared major combat operations were over, but since that time there have been over 1,000 wounded, many of them amputees who are recovering at Walter Reed, 217 killed in action since that date. Will you acknowledge now that you were premature in making those remarks?

THE PRESIDENT: Nora, I think you ought to look at my speech. I said, Iraq is a dangerous place and we've still got hard work to do, there's still more to be done. And we had just come off a very successful military operation. I was there to thank the troops.

The "Mission Accomplished" sign, of course, was put up by the members of the USS Abraham Lincoln, saying that their mission was accomplished. I know it was attributed some how to some ingenious advance man from my staff -- they weren't that ingenious, by the way. But my statement was a clear statement, basically recognizing that this phase of the war for Iraq was over and there was a lot of dangerous work. And it's proved to be right, it is dangerous in Iraq. It's dangerous in Iraq because there are people who can't stand the thought of a free and peaceful Iraq. It is dangerous in Iraq because there are some who believe that we're soft, that the will of the United States can be shaken by suiciders -- and suiciders who are willing to drive up to a Red Cross center, a center of international help and aid and comfort, and just kill.

It's the same mentality, by the way, that attacked us on September the 11th, 2001: we'll just destroy innocent life and watch the great United States and their friends and allies crater in the face of hardship. It's the exact same mentality. And Iraq is a part of the war on terror. I said it's a central front, a new front in the war on terror, and that's exactly what it is. And that's why it's important for us to be tough and strong and diligent.

Our strategy in Iraq is to have strike forces ready and capable to move quickly as we gather actionable intelligence. That's how you deal with terrorists. Remember, these are people that are willing to hide in societies and kill randomly. And therefore, the best way to deal with them is to harden targets, harden assets as best as you can. That means blockades and inspection spots. And, as you notice, yesterday, one fellow tried to -- was done in as he tried to conduct a suicide mission. In other words, an Iraqi policemen did their job.

But, as well, that we've got to make sure that not only do we harden targets, but that we get actionable intelligence to intercept the missions before they begin. That means more Iraqis involved in the intelligence-gathering systems in their country so that they are active participants in securing the country from further harm.

Remember, the action in Iraq was -- to get rid of Saddam Hussein was widely supported by the Iraqi people. And the action -- the actions that we're taking to improve their country are supported by the Iraqi people. And it's going to be very important for the Iraqi people to play an active role in fighting off the few who are trying to destroy the hopes of the many. You've heard me say that before. That's just kind of the motto of the terrorists. It's the way they operate.

Plante.

Q Mr. President, thank you. In recent weeks, you and your White House team have made a concerted effort to put a positive spin on progress in Iraq. At the same time, there's been a much more somber assessment in private, as with Secretary Rumsfeld's memo. And there are people out there who don't believe that the administration is leveling with them about the difficulty and scope of the problem in Iraq.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I can't put it any more plainly, Iraq is a dangerous place. That's leveling. It is a dangerous place. What I was saying is there's more than just terrorist attacks that are taking place in Iraq. There's schools opening, there are hospitals opening. The electricity -- the capacity to deliver electricity to the Iraqi people is back up to pre-war levels. We're nearly two million barrels a day being produced for the Iraqi people. I was just saying we've got to look at the whole picture, that what the terrorists would like is for people to focus only on the conditions which create fear, and that is the death and the toll being taken.

No, Iraq is a dangerous place, Bill. And I can't put it any more bluntly than that. I know it's a dangerous place. And I also know our strategy to rout them out -- which is to encourage better intelligence and get more Iraqis involved, and have our strike teams ready to move -- is the right strategy. People are constantly taking a look at the enemy.

In other words, one of the hallmarks of this operation in Iraq, as well as Afghanistan, was the flexibility we've given our commanders. You might remember the "stuck in the desert" scenario that -- during the dust storms, that we're advancing to Baghdad and all of a sudden we got stuck. But, remember, at that period of time it also became apparent that Tommy Franks had the flexibility necessary to adjust based upon, in this case, weather conditions and what he found.

And that's exactly what's taking place on a regular basis inside of Iraq. The strategy remains the same. The tactics to respond to more suiciders driving cars will alter on the ground; more checkpoints, whatever they decide, how to harden targets will change. And so we're constantly looking at the enemy and adjusting. And Iraq is dangerous, and it's dangerous because terrorists want us to leave. And we're not leaving.

Let's see -- Terry. Then you, Stretch.

Q Thank you, sir. Mr. President, your policies on the Middle East seem, so far, to have produced pretty meager results as the violence between Israelis and Palestinians --

THE PRESIDENT: Major or meager?

Q Meager.

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, okay.

Q Meager.

THE PRESIDENT: Meager.

Q -- as the violence between Israelis and Palestinians continues. And as you heard last week from Muslim leaders in Indonesia, your policies are seen as biased towards Israel, and I'd like to ask you about that. The government of Israel continues to build settlements in occupied territories. And it continues to build the security fence, which Palestinians see as stealing their land. You've criticized these moves mildly a couple of times, but you've never taken any concrete action to back up your words on that. Will you?

THE PRESIDENT: My policy in the Middle East is pretty clear. We are for a two-state solution. We want there to be a Palestinian state living side-by-side with Israel. Now, in order to achieve a two-state solution there needs to be a focused effort by all concerned parties to fight off terror. There are terrorists in the Middle East willing to kill to make sure that a Palestinian state doesn't emerge. It's essential that there be a focused effort to fight off terror.

Abu Mazen came here at the White House -- you were here, you witnessed the press conference. He pledged a focused and concerted effort to fight terror, so that we could have a Palestinian state emerge. And he asked for help, which we were willing to provide. Unfortunately, he is no longer in power. He was eased out of power. And I do not see the same commitment to fight terror from the old guard. And, therefore, it's going to be very hard to move a peace process forward until there's a focused effort by all parties to assume their responsibilities.

You asked about the fence. I have said the fence is a problem to the extent that the fence is a opportunity to make it difficult for a Palestinian state to emerge. There is a difference between security and land acquisition. And we have made our views clear on that issue.

I've also spoken to Prime Minister Sharon in the past about settlement activities. And the reason why that we have expressed concern about settlement activities is because we want the conditions for a Palestinian state on the ground to be positive, that when the Palestinians finally get people that are willing to fight off terror, the ground must be right so that a state can emerge; a peaceful state.

This administration is prepared to help the Palestinians develop an economy. We're prepared to help the long-suffering Palestinian people. But the long-suffering Palestinian people need leadership that is willing to do what is necessary to enable a Palestinian state to come forth.

Stretch.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Senior U.S. intelligence officials on the ground in Iraq have estimated that we have, at most, six months to restore order there and quell the violence, or else we risk losing the support of the Iraqi populace, which you've said many times we need to make this mission work. Do you share that sense of pessimism? And, if not, why not? And, in addition, are you considering the possibility of possibly adding more U.S. troops to the forces already on the ground there, to help restore order?

THE PRESIDENT: That's a decision by John Abizaid. He makes that -- General Abizaid makes the decision as to whether or not he needs more troops. I've constantly asked the Secretary of Defense, as well, when I was visiting with General Abizaid, does he have what it takes to do his mission? And he told me he does.

Secondly, I believe the Iraqi people are appreciative of the reconstruction efforts. The small business owners, who are all of a sudden beginning to realize there's a market developing, appreciate that. The mothers who send their children to the over 1,500 schools we've refurbished appreciate that. There are going to be new textbooks coming, which no longer glorify the tyrant, Saddam Hussein, but glorify basic education -- or, at least, promote basic education. They will be there. I think the people of Iraq appreciate what is taking place inside the country.

And what we, of course, want to do is implement the strategy, which is encourage Iraqis to help deal with the security issues. And that's what's taking place: we're getting better intelligence, more actionable intelligence, and the Iraqi citizens, themselves, are willing to fight off these terrorists. If you look at some of the brave actions by the Iraqi police, people who died for the future of their country, you know what I'm talking about. There are people willing to sacrifice for the future of their country, the Iraqi citizen -- the Iraqi citizen is willing to sacrifice for the future of their country.

Rosen.

Q Thank you, sir. Perhaps the clearest, strongest message you have ever sent from any podium has been what you like to call the Bush doctrine -- that is to say, if you feed a terrorist, if you clothe a terrorist, if you harbor a terrorist, you are a terrorist. And I'd like to follow up on the Middle East. You have noted that Yasser Arafat is compromised by terror; Condi Rice has said he cavorts with terror. You've both noted that he is an obstacle to peace. He has, in political terms, choked off your last two Palestinian interlocutors. What is it that prevents you from concluding that he is, in fact, under your own definition of what a terrorist is, a terrorist, and should be dealt with in the same way that you've dealt with Saddam Hussein and Charles Taylor?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, not every action requires military action, Jim. As you noticed, for example in North Korea, we've chosen to put together a multinational strategy to deal with Mr. Kim Jong-Il. Not every action requires military action. As a matter of fact, military action is the very last resort for us. And a reminder: When you mentioned Saddam Hussein, I just wanted to remind you that the Saddam Hussein military action took place after innumerable United Nations Security Council resolutions were passed -- not one, two or three, but a lot. And so this nation is very reluctant to use military force. We try to enforce doctrine peacefully, or through alliances or multinational forums. And we will continue to do so.

Elizabeth.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. You recently put Condoleezza Rice, your National Security Advisor, in charge of the management of the administration's Iraq policy. What has effectively changed since she's been in charge? And the second question, can you promise a year from now that you will have reduced the number of troops in Iraq?

THE PRESIDENT: The second question is a trick question, so I won't answer it. The first question was Condoleezza Rice. Her job is to coordinate interagency. She's doing a fine job of coordinating interagency. She's doing -- the role of the National Security Advisor is to not only provide good advice to the President, which she does on a regular basis -- I value her judgment and her intelligence -- but her job is also to deal interagency and to help unstick things that may get stuck, is the best way to put it. She's an unsticker. And -- is she listening? Okay, well, she's doing a fine job.

Dana.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. You have said that you are eager to find out whether somebody in the White House leaked the identity of an undercover CIA agent. Many experts in such investigations say you can find if there was a leaker in the White House within hours if you asked all staff members to sign affidavits denying involvement. Why not take that step?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, the best person to that, Dana, so that the -- or the best group of people to do that so that you believe the answer is the professionals at the Justice Department. And they're moving forward with the investigation. It's a criminal investigation. It is an important investigation. I'd like to know if somebody in my White House did leak sensitive information. As you know, I've been outspoken on leaks. And whether they happened in the White House, or happened in the administration, or happened on Capitol Hill, it is a -- they can be very damaging.

And so this investigation is ongoing and -- by professionals who do this for a living, and I hope they -- I'd like to know.

Judy.

Q Sir, in your last campaign, you said that the American public was not ready for a complete ban on abortion. You're about to sign legislation that will ban a certain abortion procedure known as partial birth. Do you believe that the climate has changed since the last campaign and all abortions should be banned? And do you believe your brother made the correct decision in Florida when he intervened in the case of a woman who had been ordered by the courts to be taken off life support?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I believe my brother made the right decision. Yes, I'll sign the ban on partial birth abortion. And, no, I don't think the culture has changed to the extent that the American people or the Congress would totally ban abortions.

Let's see. Mark Smith, a radio man.

Q Thank you very much, sir, for including our radio folks here.

THE PRESIDENT: A face for radio. (Laughter.)

Q I wish I could say that was the first time you told me that, sir. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: The first time I did it to a national audience, though. (Laughter.)

Q Actually -- my wife the last time. (Laughter.)

Your package of reconstruction aid, sir, that the Congress, as you point out, is considering -- that's an emergency package, meaning it's not budgeted for. Put another way, that means the American taxpayer and future generations of American taxpayers are saddled with that. Why should they be saddled with that? I know you don't want the Iraqis to be saddled with large amounts of debt, but should future generations of Americans have that --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, it's a one-time expenditure, as you know. And, secondly, because a secure, a peaceful and free Iraq is essential to the security, the future security of America.

The first step was to remove Saddam Hussein because he was a threat, a gathering threat, as I think I put it. And, secondly, is to make sure that, in the aftermath of removing Saddam Hussein, that we have a free and peaceful country in the midst of a very troubled region. It's an historic opportunity. And I will continue to make that case to the American people. It's a chance to secure -- have a more secure future for our children. It's essential we get it right.

You know, I was struck by the fact when I was in Japan recently that my relations with Prime Minister Koizumi are very close and personal. And I was thinking about what would happen if, in a post-World War II era, we hadn't won the peace, as well as the war. I mean, would I have had the same relationship with Mr. Koizumi? Would I be able to work closely on crucial relations? I doubt it. I doubt it.

In other words, we've got very close alliances now as a result of not only winning a war, but doing the right things in the postwar period. And I believe a free and peaceful Iraq will help effect change in that neighborhood. And that's why I've asked the American people to foot the tab for \$20 billion of reconstruction. Others are stepping up, as well: \$13 billion out of the Madrid conference, which may be just only a beginning.

And, by the way, in the Madrid conference, most of the money came from the World Bank and the IMF, which are lending institutions, as you know. The Iraqi oil revenues, excess Iraqi oil revenues, coupled with private investment, should make up the difference to fund the estimates of what the World Bank thought was necessary to help that country.

Q Another radio? Another radio, Mr. President?

THE PRESIDENT: Excuse me -- particularly, since you interrupted me, no.

And that's what the World Bank estimated it would cost, and it looks like we'll be able to help the Iraqis get on their feet and have a viable marketplace.

Bill Douglas.

Q Speaking of -- in speaking on Abu Mazen, do you feel this administration did everything it could to help him out with his situation?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I do.

Q And, secondly, on Iraq, do you feel that the attacks that have happened recently will discourage some countries to contribute troops or manpower?

THE PRESIDENT: Good question. I hope not. That's what the terrorists want. They want countries to say, oh, gosh, well, we better not send anybody there because somebody might get hurt. That's precisely what they're trying to do. And that's why it's important for this nation and our other coalition partners to stand our ground, to improve our intelligence, to move quickly when we find good intelligence and to bring people to justice.

The terrorists rely on the death of innocent people to create the conditions of fear that, therefore, will cause people to lose their will. That's their strategy. And it's a pretty clear strategy to me. And this country will stay the course. We'll do our job. And it's to our interest that we do our job. It's in our interest we do our job for a free world. A free Iraq is essential to creating conditions of peace. See, that's what this is all about. This is, how do we achieve a peaceful tomorrow; how do we do our duty for our children and our grandchildren?

We must never forget the lessons of September the 11th. The terrorists will strike, and they will kill innocent life, not only in front of a Red Cross headquarters, they will strike and kill in America, too. We are at war. I said right after September the 11th, this would be a different kind of war; sometimes you'd see action and sometimes you wouldn't. It's a different kind of war than what we're used to. And Iraq is a front on the war on terror. And we will win this particular battle on the war on terror.

And it's dangerous, and it's tough. And at the same time that we're confronting the danger, we're also helping rebuild a society. We put in a new currency in place. For the financial types who are here, you'll understand how difficult that assignment is. And yet it seems to be going well. It's an achievement that is a very important achievement for the future of Iraq. A stable currency, a new currency, a currency without the picture of the dictator or the tyrant or the torturer, however you want to define him, is important for the future. And that's taking place. There's a market developing. There are women-owned small businesses now beginning to flourish in Iraq. And there's positive things happening in the midst of the danger.

And I hope that countries, when they take a look at the situation there, understand the nature of the terrorists and the strategy of the terrorists, and don't back off.

Tom Hamburger, you got a question? If not, make one up.

Q Mr. President, tonight you're meeting with Muslim leaders at an Iftaar dinner --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q And I wondered if you could tell us your reaction when you encountered Muslim leaders in Indonesia. Were you surprised at the hostility they expressed towards the United States and towards your policies, both in the Middle East? And also, I understand that some of them brought up specific comments made by General Boykin --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, they did.

Q And I wondered if you would address those comments and whether you think that General Boykin ought to be disciplined or resign.

THE PRESIDENT: Sure, I appreciate that. First, the characterization of hostility, that just wasn't the case. It was not a hostile meeting, nor did I sense hostility. Quite the contrary. I think the five leaders I met with were appreciative for a chance to express their views. But it was a very positive meeting, very hopeful.

Two things that came out of there that I think will interest you, one was that -- the question was, why do Americans think Muslims are terrorists? That was the universal question from the three Muslim leaders. And my answer was, it's not what Americans think. Americans think terrorists are evil people who have hijacked a great religion. That's why Mr. Boykin's comments were -- General Boykin's comments don't reflect the administration's comments. And by the way, there's an IG investigation going on inside the Defense Department now about that. He doesn't reflect my point of view, or the view of this administration.

Our war is not against the Muslim faith. As a matter of fact, as you mentioned, tonight we're celebrating the Iftaar dinner with Muslim leaders. We welcome Muslims in our country. In America, we love the fact that we are a society in which people can pray openly -- or not pray at all, for that matter. And I made that point to the Muslim leaders.

Secondly, the question was about the Middle Eastern policy. Why is your policy so slanted toward Israel, was the question. And I informed them I was the first President ever to have advocated a Palestinian state. I did so at the United Nations. I also informed them that in order for a Palestinian state to go forward, as I told Terry, there must be a focused, concerted effort to destroy the terrorist networks who are trying to prevent a Palestinian state from emerging, which requires good, strong, capable leadership, is what it requires.

And so those were the two main points that were brought up. There was concern about General Boykin. It seemed like to me that we've got a challenge to make sure that people in countries like Indonesia understand the nature of the American people, that how we think is going to be an important part of good diplomacy in the long run. That we've got to fight off the imagery of a society which condemns entire swaths of people because of the acts of a few -- which is not the way we are.

And I was pleased to get the opportunity to make that case to the leaders. It was a very cordial and good discussion, and I -- I'm going to drop them a note, thanking them for showing up and giving me a chance to talk about the America I know and love.

Bill.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. After more than a year of being accused by your critics of waging war for oil, is it frustrating to now hear some of those same critics demand that you, essentially, take that oil in the form of loans instead of grants for reconstruction?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, that's exactly the point I made to the members of Congress who have come here to the White House to talk about loans or grants. I said, let's don't burden Iraq with loans. The only thing they'll be able to repay their loans with is oil. And, hopefully, we'll get a good solution out of the Congress on this issue. We're making progress. We're working hard with the members to make the case that it's very important for us not to saddle Iraq with a bunch of debt early in its -- in the emergence of a market-oriented economy, an economy that has been wrecked by Mr. Saddam Hussein. I mean, he just

destroyed their economy and destroyed their infrastructure, destroyed their education system, destroyed their medical system, all to keep himself in power. He was the ultimate --

Q -- on the part of your critics?

THE PRESIDENT: No, that's my answer there.

Hillman.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. You have repeatedly urged Americans to have patience when they view postwar operations in Iraq. But isn't there a limit to American patience, particularly in an election year, when your foreign policies --

THE PRESIDENT: Interesting question.

Q -- will be the center of debate?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think the American people are patient during an election year, because they tend to be able to differentiate between politics and reality. As a matter of fact, the American people are -- the electorate is a heck of a lot smarter than most politicians.

And the only thing I know to do is just keep telling people what I think is right for the country and stand my -- stand on what I believe, and that's what I'm going to do. And there's no question politics can -- will create -- get a lot of noise and a lot of balloon drops and a lot of hot air. I'll probably be right in the mix of it, by the way. But I will defend my record at the appropriate time, and look forward to it. I'll say that the world is more peaceful and more free under my leadership, and America is more secure. And that will be the -- that will be how I'll begin describing our foreign policy.

Ed, and then Bob, and then I'm going to go eat lunch.

Q Are we invited? (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: It depends on your question.

Q Fair enough. Mr. President, you talked about politics. For weeks, if not months now, when questions have been posed to members of your team, those questions have been dismissed as politics, and a time will come later to address those questions. You, indeed, have said that, yourself. How can the public differentiate between reality and politics, when you and your campaign have raised over \$80 million and you're saying that the season has not started?

THE PRESIDENT: You're not invited to lunch. (Laughter.)

Look, we are -- we're arming, raising money to wage a campaign. And there will be an appropriate time for me to engage politically; that is, in the public forum. Right now, I'm -- yes, no question, I'm going out to our friends and supporters and saying, would you mind contributing to the campaign for the year '04? To me, that's -- and that's a part of politics, no question about it. And as you know, these are open forums, you're able to come and listen to what I have to say.

To me, there's a difference between that and actually engaging potential opponents in a public discourse in a debate. And there will be ample time for that. There will be ample time to differentiate views and to defend records in the face of political criticism. And I know that the campaign has started for some, in terms of the public debate from a political perspective. It just hadn't for me yet.

And we'll continue to lay the groundwork for the campaign. I mean, there's organizing efforts going on in states right now. There are people being put in place that are going to work hard to turn out the vote. I mean, after all, the election is nearly a year away. There will be -- we're preparing different strategies in order to run a viable campaign.

But I'm focused on the security of the American people, working with Congress to get a Medicare bill and an energy bill. And we'll continue to use the platform I have to urge passage of those two pieces of legislation. As a matter of fact, tomorrow I'll be giving a speech on Medicare, and the next day I'll be talking about energy. And we'll continue to talk about job creation. But in terms of the balloon drops and all that business, it will be a little while for me to be catching the confetti, as they say.

Bob, last question.

Q Thank you, sir. Mr. President --

THE PRESIDENT: Good-looking vest, fine-looking vest.

Q Thank you, sir. (Laughter.) It's inspired by some of the attire from your colleagues last week. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. (Laughter.)



Q Sir, David Kay's interim report cited substantial evidence of a secretive weapons program. But the absence of any substantial stores of chemical or biological weapons there have caused some people, even who supported the war, to feel somehow betrayed. Can you explain to those Americans, sir, whether you were surprised those weapons haven't turned up, why they haven't turned up, and whether you feel that your administration's credibility has been affected in any way by that?

THE PRESIDENT: David Kay's report said that Saddam Hussein was in material breach of 1441, which would have been casus belli. In other words, he had a weapons program, he's disguised a weapons program, he had ambitions. And I felt the report was a very interesting first report -- because he's still looking for -- to find the truth.

The American people know that Saddam Hussein was a gathering danger, as I said. And he was a gathering danger, and the world is safer as a result for us removing him from power -- "us" being more than the United States, Great Britain and other countries who are willing to participate -- Poland, Australia -- all willing to join up to remove this danger.

And the intelligence that said he had a weapons system was intelligence that had been used by a multinational agency, the U.N., to pass resolutions; it had been used by my predecessor to conduct bombing raids. It was intelligence gathered from a variety of sources that clearly said Saddam Hussein was a threat.

And given the attacks of September the 11th, it was -- we needed to enforce U.N. resolution for the security of the world. And we did. We took action based upon good, solid intelligence. It was the right thing to do to make America more secure and the world more peaceful.

And David Kay continues to ferret out the truth. This is a man -- Saddam Hussein is a man who hid programs and weapons for years. He's a master at hiding things. And so David Kay will continue his search. But one of the things that he first found was that there is clear violation of the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1441. Material breach, they call it in the diplomatic circles. Casus belli, it means a -- that would have been a cause for a war. In other words, he said, it's dangerous.

And we were right to enforce U.N. resolutions, as well. It's important for the U.N. to be a credible organization. You're not credible if you issue resolutions and then nothing happens. Credibility comes when you say something is going to happen and then it does happen. And in order to keep the peace, it's important for there to be credibility in this world, credibility on the side of freedom and hope.

Thank you all very much.

END 12:03 P.M. EST

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