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Vice President's Remarks on the War on Terror

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THE VICE PRESIDENT: Good morning, and thank you all very much. And thank you, Chris. It's great to be back at AEI. Both Lynne and I have a long history with the American Enterprise Institute, and we value the association, and even more, we value the friendships that have come from our time here. And I want to thank all of you for coming this morning and for your welcome.

My remarks today concern national security, in particular the war on terror and the Iraq front in that war. Several days ago, I commented briefly on some recent statements that have been made by some members of Congress about Iraq. Within hours of my speech, a report went out on the wires under the headline, "Cheney says war critics 'dishonest,' 'reprehensible.'"



One thing I've learned in the last five years is that when you're Vice President, you're lucky if your speeches get any attention at all. But I do have a quarrel with that headline, and it's important to make this point at the outset. I do not believe it is wrong to criticize the war on terror or any aspect thereof. Disagreement, argument, and debate are the essence of democracy, and none of us should want it any other way. For my part, I've spent a career in public service, run for office eight times -- six statewide offices and twice nationally. I served in the House of Representatives for better than a decade, most of that time as a member of the leadership of the minority party. To me, energetic debate on issues facing our country is more than just a sign of a healthy political system -- it's also something I enjoy. It's one of the reasons I've stayed in this business. And I believe the feeling is probably the same for most of us in public life.

For those of us who don't mind debating, there's plenty to keep us busy these days, and it's not likely to change any time soon. On the question of national security, feelings run especially strong, and there are deeply held differences of opinion on how best to protect the United States and our friends against the dangers of our time. Recently my friend and former colleague Jack Murtha called for a complete withdrawal of American forces now serving in Iraq, with a drawdown to begin at once. I disagree with Jack and believe his proposal would not serve the best interests of this nation. But he's a good man, a

Marine, a patriot -- and he's taking a clear stand in an entirely legitimate discussion.

Nor is there any problem with debating whether the United States and our allies should have liberated Iraq in the first place. Here, as well, the differing views are very passionately and forcefully stated. But nobody is saying we should not be having this discussion, or that you cannot reexamine a decision made by the President and the Congress some years ago. To the contrary, I believe it is critical that we continue to remind ourselves why this nation took action, and why Iraq is the central front in the war on terror, and why we have a duty to persevere.

What is not legitimate -- and what I will again say is dishonest and reprehensible -- is the suggestion by some U. S. senators that the President of the United States or any member of his administration purposely misled the American people on pre-war intelligence.



Some of the most irresponsible comments have come from politicians who actually voted in favor of authorizing the use of force against Saddam Hussein. These are elected officials who had access to the intelligence materials. They are known to have a high opinion of their own analytical capabilities. (Laughter.) And they were free to reach their own judgments based upon the evidence. They concluded, as the President and I had concluded, and as the previous administration had concluded, that Saddam Hussein was a threat. Available intelligence indicated that the dictator of Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, and this judgment was shared by the intelligence agencies of many other nations, according to the bipartisan Silberman-Robb Commission. All of us understood, as well, that for more than a decade, the U.N. Security Council had demanded that Saddam Hussein make a full accounting of his weapons programs. The burden of proof was entirely on the dictator of Iraq -- not on the U.N. or the United States or anyone else. And he repeatedly refused to comply throughout the course of the decade.

Permit me to burden you with a bit more history: In August of 1998, the U.S. Congress passed a resolution urging President Clinton take "appropriate action" to compel Saddam to come into compliance with his obligations to the Security Council. Not a single senator voted no. Two months later, in October of '98 -- again, without a single dissenting vote in the United States Senate -- the Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act. It explicitly adopted as American policy supporting efforts to remove Saddam Hussein's regime from power and promoting an Iraqi democracy in its place. And just two months after signing the Iraq Liberation law, President Clinton ordered that Iraq be bombed in an effort to destroy facilities that he believed were connected to Saddam's weapons of mass destruction programs.

By the time Congress voted to authorize force in late 2002, there was broad-based, bipartisan agreement that the time had come to enforce the legitimate demands of the international community. And our thinking was informed by what had happened to our country on the morning of September 11th, 2001. As the prime target of terrorists who have shown an ability to hit America and who wish to do so in spectacular fashion, we have a responsibility to do everything we can to keep terrible weapons out of the hands of these enemies. And we must hold to account regimes that could supply

those weapons to terrorists in defiance of the civilized world. As the President has said, "Terrorists and terror states do not reveal ... threats with fair notice, in formal declarations -- and responding to such enemies only after they have struck first is not self-defense, it is suicide."

In a post-9/11 world, the President and Congress of the United States declined to trust the word of a dictator who had a history of weapons of mass destruction programs, who actually used weapons of mass destruction against innocent civilians in his own country, who tried to assassinate a former President of the United States, who was routinely shooting at allied pilots trying to enforce no fly zones, who had excluded weapons inspectors, who had defied the demands of the international community, whose regime had been designated an official state sponsor of terror, and who had committed mass murder. Those are the facts.

Although our coalition has not found WMD stockpiles in Iraq, I repeat that we never had the burden of proof; Saddam Hussein did. We operated on the best available intelligence, gathered over a period of years from within a totalitarian society ruled by fear and secret police. We also had the experience of the first Gulf War -- when the intelligence community had seriously underestimated the extent and progress Saddam had made toward developing nuclear weapons.

Finally, according to the Duelfer report, Saddam Hussein wanted to preserve the capability to reconstitute his weapons of mass destruction when sanctions were lifted. And we now know that the sanctions regime had lost its effectiveness and been totally undermined by Saddam Hussein's successful effort to corrupt the Oil for Food program.

The flaws in the intelligence are plain enough in hindsight, but any suggestion that prewar information was distorted, hyped, or fabricated by the leader of the nation is utterly false. Senator John McCain put it best: "It is a lie to say that the President lied to the American people."

American soldiers and Marines serving in Iraq go out every day into some of the most dangerous and unpredictable conditions. Meanwhile, back in the United States, a few politicians are suggesting these brave Americans were sent into battle for a deliberate falsehood. This is revisionism of the most corrupt and shameless variety. It has no place anywhere in American politics, much less in the United States Senate.

One might also argue that untruthful charges against the Commander-in-Chief have an insidious effect on the war effort itself. I'm unwilling to say that, only because I know the character of the United States Armed Forces -- men and women who are fighting the war on terror in Iraq, Afghanistan, and many other fronts. They haven't wavered in the slightest, and their conduct should make all Americans proud. They are absolutely relentless in their duties, and they are carrying out their missions with all the skill and the honor we expect of them. I think of the ones who put on heavy gear and work 12-hour shifts in the desert heat. Every day they are striking the enemy -- conducting raids, training up Iraqi forces, countering attacks, seizing weapons, and capturing killers. Americans appreciate our fellow citizens who go out on long deployments and endure the hardship of separation from home and family. We care about those who have returned with injuries, and who face the long, hard road of recovery. And our nation grieves for the men and women whose lives have ended in freedom's cause.

The people who serve in uniform, and their families, can be certain: that their cause is right and just and necessary, and we will stand behind them with pride and without wavering until the day of victory.

The men and women on duty in this war are serving the highest ideals of this nation -- our belief in freedom and justice, equality, and the dignity of the individual. And they are serving the vital security interests of the United States. There is no denying that the work is difficult and there is much yet to do. Yet we can harbor no illusions about the nature of this enemy, or the ambitions it seeks to achieve.

In the war on terror we face a loose network of committed fanatics, found in many countries, operating under different commanders. Yet the branches of this network share the same basic ideology and the same dark vision for the world. The terrorists want to end American and Western influence in the Middle East. Their goal in that region is to gain control of the country, so they have a base from which to launch attacks and to wage war against governments that do not meet their demands. For a time, the terrorists had such a base in Afghanistan, under the backward and violent rule of the Taliban. And the terrorists hope to overturn Iraq's democratic government and return that country to the rule of tyrants. The terrorists believe that by controlling an entire country, they will be able to target and overthrow other governments in the region, and to establish a radical Islamic empire that encompasses a region from Spain, across North Africa, through the Middle East and South Asia, all the way to Indonesia. They have made clear, as well, their ultimate ambitions: to arm themselves with weapons of mass destruction, to destroy Israel, to intimidate all Western countries, and to cause mass death in the United States.

Some have suggested that by liberating Iraq from Saddam Hussein, we simply stirred up a hornet's nest. They overlook a fundamental fact: We were not in Iraq on September 11th, 2001 -- and the terrorists hit us anyway. The reality is that terrorists were at war with our country long before the liberation of Iraq, and long before the attacks of 9/11. And for many years, they were the ones on the offensive. They grew bolder in the belief that if they killed Americans, they could change American policy. In Beirut in 1983, terrorists killed 241 of our service men. Thereafter, the United States withdrew from Beirut. In Mogadishu in 1993, terrorists killed 19 American soldiers. Thereafter, the U.S. withdrew its forces from Somalia. Over time, the terrorists concluded that they could strike America without paying a price, because they did, repeatedly: the bombing at the World Trade Center in 1993, the murders at the Saudi National Guard Training Center in Riyadh in 1995, the Khobar Towers in 1996, the simultaneous bombings of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and, of course, the bombing of the USS Cole in 2000.

Believing they could strike us with impunity and that they could change U.S. policy, they attacked us on 9/11 here in the homeland, killing 3,000 people. Now they are making a stand in Iraq -- testing our resolve, trying to intimidate the United States into abandoning our friends and permitting the overthrow of this new Middle Eastern democracy. Recently we obtained a message from the number-two man in al Qaeda, Mr. Zawahiri, that he sent to his chief deputy in Iraq, the terrorist Zarqawi. The letter makes clear that Iraq is part of a larger plan of imposing Islamic radicalism across the broader Middle East -- making Iraq a terrorist haven and a staging ground for attacks against other nations. Zawahiri also expresses the view that America can be made to run again.

In light of the commitments our country has made, and given the stated intentions of the enemy, those who advocate a sudden withdrawal from Iraq should answer a few simple questions: Would the United

States and other free nations be better off, or worse off, with Zarqawi, bin Laden, and Zawahiri in control of Iraq? Would we be safer, or less safe, with Iraq ruled by men intent on the destruction of our country?

It is a dangerous illusion to suppose that another retreat by the civilized world would satisfy the appetite of the terrorists and get them to leave us alone. In fact such a retreat would convince the terrorists that free nations will change our policies, forsake our friends, abandon our interests whenever we are confronted with murder and blackmail. A precipitous withdrawal from Iraq would be a victory for the terrorists, an invitation to further violence against free nations, and a terrible blow to the future security of the United States of America.

So much self-defeating pessimism about Iraq comes at a time of real progress in that country. Coalition forces are making decisive strikes against terrorist strongholds, and more and more they are doing so with Iraqi forces at their side. There are more than 90 Iraqi army battalions fighting the terrorists, along with our forces. On the political side, every benchmark has been met successfully -- starting with the turnover of sovereignty more than a year ago, the national elections last January, the drafting of the constitution and its ratification by voters just last month, and, a few weeks from now, the election of a new government under that new constitution.

The political leaders of Iraq are steady and 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. Iraqi citizens are doing 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 Arabs and fellow Muslims.

Day after day, Iraqis are proving their determination to live in freedom, to chart their own destiny, and to defend their own 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 nation.

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 known. All this has come to pass. We have faced, and are facing today, enemies who hate us, hate our country, and hate the liberties for which we stand. They dwell in the shadows, wear no uniform, 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 the Americans who go into the fight are among the bravest citizens this nation has ever produced. All who have labored in this cause can be proud of their service for the rest of their lives.

The terrorists lack any capacity to inspire the hearts of good men and women. And their only chance for victory is for us to walk away from the fight. They have contempt for our values, they doubt our strength, and they believe that America will lose our nerve and let down our guard. But this nation has

made a decision: We will not retreat in the face of brutality, and we will never live at the mercy of tyrants or terrorists.

None of us can know every turn that lies ahead for America in the fight against terror. And because we are Americans, we are going to keep discussing the conduct and the progress of this war and having debates about strategy. Yet the direction of events is plain to see, and this period of struggle and testing should also be seen as a time of promise. The United States of America is a good country, a decent country, and we are making the world a better place by defending the innocent, confronting the violent, and bringing freedom to the oppressed. We understand the continuing dangers to civilization, and we have the resources, the strength, and the moral courage to overcome those dangers and lay the foundations for a better world.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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Return to this article at:

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