



For Immediate Release
Office of the Vice President
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Vice President's Remarks at a Rally for the Troops in Iraq

Al-Asad Air Base
Al-Asad, Iraq

2:49 P.M. (Local)

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I'm not Jessica Simpson. (Laughter.) But I'm glad to be here, and I thank you for that warm welcome; General Johnson, for the kind words. And I want to say good afternoon to all my fellow Americans. I happened to be in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd drop by.

We're a long way from Washington, and I can't imagine being in better company than I am right now. I've come with a message from home: Americans are grateful for your service; they support your mission; we're proud of each and every one of you.

It's a privilege to be here, to stand on the ground of the world's newest democracy -- to be with so many men and women who helped make this history. I wanted to pay this visit during the holidays to express appreciation to all of you and to every American serving in this part of the world. With Christmas and Hanukkah arriving next week, I know your thoughts naturally turn to home. And your fellow Americans are thinking of you more than ever. I'm pleased to bring you the good wishes of the entire country, and personal greetings from our Commander-in-Chief, President George W. Bush. (Applause.)



You're here in western Iraq to provide security and stability through al Anbar so that a rising democracy can succeed and the liberated people of Iraq can build a future of hope, opportunity and peace.

From Marines going into combat and dominating the battle space, to the precision strikes of the Air Force, to the Army brigades holding and operating across wide terrain, to Navy corpsmen risking their lives to help the wounded, and to Seabees all over the country, day and night, preparing runways, fixing water pumps, and doing a hundred other tasks, Americans serving in Iraq have been absolutely superb.

You've done all that we've asked of you. You've shown all the skill we require of you, and you have

confirmed the honor we expect of you. Our nation has counted on the Marine Corps for more than 230 years. The Marines are repaying that confidence every day as we fight the global war on terror. (Applause.)

When the United States was attacked on a terrible September morning four years ago, President Bush said the struggle would be long and difficult. It would require our best efforts and unfailing resolve. And in this fight some of the hardest duties have come to the Corps and to the units that serve alongside them. There is still difficult work ahead because the terrorists regard Iraq as the central front in a war against the civilized world. We have a responsibility to lead in this fight, and we have to be clear-eyed about the nature of the enemy and the ambitions it seeks to achieve.

In the war on terror, we face a loose network of committed fanatics found in many countries and operating under different commanders, yet the branches of this network share the same basic ideology, and the same dark vision. Their goal in this region is to gain control of a country, to target and overthrow other governments in the area, and to establish a radical Islamic empire that encompasses the Middle East and places far beyond.

They've made clear, as well, their ultimate ambition: to acquire weapons of mass destruction, to destroy Israel, to intimidate all Western countries, to cause mass death in the United States. The terrorists' war against America began long before 9/11. And during those years, they were the ones on the offensive. They grew bolder in their belief that if they killed Americans, they could change American policy. In Beirut in 1983, terrorists killed 241 of our servicemen. Thereafter, the U.S. withdrew from Beirut. In Mogadishu in 1993, terrorists killed 19 Americans; thereafter, the U.S. withdrew from Somalia. Over time the terrorists concluded that they could strike America without paying a price because they did -- repeatedly: the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York in 1993; the murders at the Saudi National Guard training facility in Riyadh in 1995; the attack on Khobar Towers in 1996; the attack on our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998; the attack on the USS Cole in 2000.

Ultimately, of course, they attacked the homeland on 9/11 and took the lives of 3,000 people aboard passenger jets, and at the World Trade Center, and at the Pentagon.

Now terrorists are making a stand here in Iraq, trying to force the United States to abandon our friends, and permit the overthrow of this new Middle Eastern democracy. Zarqawi has sworn his allegiance to bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda. And recently we got our hands on a message from bin Laden's deputy, Zawahiri, sent to 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 made to run again. But we're giving him an education. We're in this fight to win. These colors don't run.

The terrorists understand what is at stake in Iraq. That is why they commit acts of random war calculated to shock and intimidate the civilized world -- beheading bound men, murdering mothers and children, killing innocent Iraqis at police stations, mosques, buses, restaurants, stores, and on street corners. The terrorists know that as freedom takes hold, the ideologies of hatred and resentment will lose their appeal. And the advance of democracy in this land will inspire reformers throughout the

region.

As this region experiences new hope and progress, we will see the power of freedom change our world, and a terrible threat will be removed from the lives of our children and our grandchildren. This is a battle for the future of civilization. It's a battle worth fighting. It is a battle we are going to win. (Applause.)

I know most of you have heard the political debates that have been going on back home. You've heard some prominent voices advocating a sudden withdrawal of our forces from Iraq. Some have suggested this war is not winnable. And a few seem almost eager to conclude that the struggle is already over. But they are wrong. The only way to lose this fight is to quit. And that is not an option.

Every American serving in this war can be absolutely certain the people of the United States are behind you. Americans will not support a policy of submission, resignation, or defeatism in the face of terror. Our country will never go back to the false comforts of the world before September 11, 2001. Terrorist attacks are not caused by the use of strength; they are invited by the perception of weakness. And this nation has made a decision: We will engage these enemies, facing them far from home so that we do not have to face them on the streets of our own cities.

Freedom has determined enemies in Iraq, and your job is to make those enemies miserable. And you know exactly how to do it. You've scored daily victories -- even hourly victories during regimental patrols. From the western Euphrates River Valley, all the way up to the Syrian border, you've secured crossing points, destroyed enemy weapons caches, cleared urban areas of terrorists so the good people of this country can go about their lives free of bullying and brutality.

In Operation Steel Curtain, for example, Americans fought beside Iraqis and cleared terrorists from three cities. It was rightly called a "vintage Marine Corps fight" -- harsh conditions, relentless, efficient and decisive.

The support and supply operations carried out here are massive, and superbly run. We have an air arm with attack, transport and re-supply units, attack jets, re-fuelers, all working constantly in support of the ground. We've got major supply runs going night and day across an area of operations the size of Utah. Marines and other coalition forces have put tremendous effort in standing up Iraqi security forces. And we've come a great distance in the past year. More and more coalition forces have Iraqis at your side, helping to clear out terrorists and stay in the area to maintain the peace. You're helping to build an Iraqi force that is sharp, well equipped, and this was vital to the success of last week's elections.

Going forward, the multinational force will continue to mentor, train and support the Iraqi security forces as they take a more prominent role in defense of their country. Gradually, Iraqi forces are taking control of more Iraqi territory. As they undertake further missions on their own, confidence is growing within the country. More intelligence information is coming from the Iraqi people themselves.

As the ISF 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 on behalf of the

President, I assure you, any decisions about troop levels will be driven by the conditions on the ground and the judgment of our commanders, not by artificial timelines set by politicians in Washington, D.C.

Each one of you is helping to write a proud chapter in the history of freedom. At times you may wonder if your fellow citizens realize the extent of your achievements, how hard you've worked, how urgent and dangerous our business can be, and how it feels to say farewell to a fellow Marine whose life was taken by a terrorist.

I want you to know that Americans do realize it, and our whole country is filled with respect and with gratitude. Americans know about the heroism out here every day, the point raids, heavy engagements against insurgent positions, cordon and search operations, and night security patrols. They stand in total admiration. They learn of Marines and corpsmen who run through heavy fire assisting their comrades; they learn of a lance corporal who used his bare hands to tear open the air conditioning assembly on a burning vehicle so he could pull an unconscious Marine to safety.

We know how tough your work really is, and we know how tough a person it takes to get the job done right -- tough enough to wear heavy armor then the thermometer hits 125; to work seven days a week, often 14, 16, 18 hours a day. Americans are not the kind of people to take our military for granted. We're a democracy, defended by volunteers who deserve all the tools and all the support we can possibly provide. Our goal is victory. With you in the fight, that victory is certain.

We are a nation that keeps its word, and so we will carry out our strategy for victory in Iraq. America is a good and generous country. And in your conduct, you're showing the Iraqi people the true character of the United States. Members of our military work in the neighborhoods to make sure poor Iraqi families have electricity, water, and sanitation, see to it that children have classrooms and school supplies. By your openness, decency and your kindness to others, thousands of interactions every day, you've built permanent bonds of friendship between our two countries. This new democracy is awakening to a future of hope and freedom. It's a sign that much is right with the world as Iraqis take control of their own destiny. And the tyrant who filled mass graves, terrorized this nation for decades has gone from a palace, to a bunker, to a spider hole, to jail.

Inside the White House in a room next to the Oval Office, we display the flags of the Armed Forces of the United States. The battle colors of the Marine Corps are there with streamers commemorating great victories for human freedom. Generations of Americans have admired the Marines for gallantry in battle. From the Argonne Forest, to Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Chosin Reservoir, to Khe Sahn, Desert Storm, Americans have always stepped forward to sacrifice -- defending the innocent, confronting the violent and bringing freedom to the oppressed.

In this young century and a dangerous time for our country, we understand our duties. We have the resources, the strength, and the moral courage to overcome the danger and lay the foundation for a better world. This year the Marines added battle streamers marking the Afghanistan campaign, the Iraq campaign, and the global war on terror. Marines can forever take pride in the quality of the work that's being accomplished here, and at the character of the men and women who are doing it.

You're meeting every challenge with focus and great effectiveness, above all with honor. And I want

you to know especially at Christmastime how much you mean to America. This is a season for counting our blessings. Americans realize how fortunate we are to have people like you wearing the uniform of our country.

Thank you once again for serving far from home at an hour of great need. You reflect immense credit on the uniform you wear and the cause you serve. And I want to thank you for what you've done for us. Semper Fi. (Applause.)

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