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President Discusses War on Terror Following Pentagon Briefing

The Pentagon

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THE PRESIDENT: Today our nation mourns those who lost their lives in the mining accident in West Virginia. We send our prayers and heartfelt condolences to the loved ones whose hearts are broken. We ask that the good Lord comfort them in their time of need.

I want to thank the Governor of West Virginia for showing such compassion, and I want to thank those who risked their lives to save those miners for showing such courage. May God bless the good people of West Virginia.

I just finished an important meeting, a briefing with members of my national security team, a briefing hosted by Secretary Don Rumsfeld and General Pete Pace. We spent time talking about this war on terror, the global war on terror. And to make sure that my team understood the progress we've made and the challenges ahead, the Secretary asked three of our commanders to join in the briefing: Generals Abizaid, Casey and General Dempsey.

I want to tell the American people that I am most impressed by the caliber of these generals. They are smart, they are capable, they are visionary and they're working hard to win this global war. We also were able to speak to one of our fine ambassadors, Ambassador Khalilzad, from Baghdad, as well.



During our briefing we talked about the areas of concern in this global war on terror, recognizing that the enemy, which has an ideology of hate and a desire to kill, lurks in parts around the world. I assured the generals that this administration would do everything in our power to bring these enemies to justice.

We also spent time talking about the two major fronts in this war on terror, and that would be Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, 2005 was a year of progress toward meeting our goal of victory. If you really think about it, there was three important elections that took place, and in an atmosphere that some predicted wouldn't yield democracy. We had the January elections, we had the constitution elections, we had elections last December when nearly 11 million people defied the terrorists to vote. The turnout in that country was 70 percent. Part of our strategy for defeating the enemy in Iraq is for there to be a viable political process. And when 70 percent of the people show up to vote, that's a good sign. See, people are saying, I want to participate in the democratic process. The Iraqis showed great courage.

Now, we look forward to the process, obviously, moving on. The formation of a unity government is going to be important to the stability of the future of Iraq. Before that happens, obviously you've got to finish counting the votes. And that's going to happen over the next couple of weeks. And then the government -- they're beginning to form the government under their new constitution. It takes a two-third vote of the parliament for certain top officials to assume office. And to form this inclusive government, the Iraqi leaders must compromise and negotiate and build consensus, and this is going to take some time.

What the American people will see during the weeks ahead is a political process unfold; that people will be making decisions not based upon who has got the biggest gun, but who has got the capacity to rally the will of the people. And that's positive. Democracies are an important part of our winning the war on terror. Democracies yield an ideology that is based on an ideology that says, people are free -- free to choose. The ideology of the enemy says, a few people will choose, and if you don't like what we tell you to believe in, we'll kill you, or -- or treat you harshly.



And I want the American people to remember what life was like for the poor people in Afghanistan under the Taliban. The Taliban had no hopeful vision. Their vision was, if you don't agree with us, we'll take you in the public square and whip you. Their vision was, women don't have rights. Their vision was a dark and dim vision, which stands in stark contrast to the vision based upon freedom and democracy.

The second part of our strategy is to -- in Iraq, a strategy for victory, is to train the Iraqis so they can take the fight against the few who would stop the progress of many. And during this election, we were briefed about the security forces during the election. The commanders talked about more than 215,000 Iraqi soldiers and police that secured the country. That was an increase, by the way, of 85,000 since January of 2005. General Casey labeled the performance of the troops as superb.

Before the elections there was a number of joint operations to lay the groundwork for a peaceful election. The Iraqis were in the lead on election day. In other words, they were responsible for the security of the elections. We were in a position to help them, but they were responsible for securing the voting booths. And they did a fine job. The number of attacks during the election were down dramatically. They performed. And that's part of our calibrating whether or not the Iraqi troops are

becoming more capable. Numbers are one thing, but the ability to perform is another. And during these elections, the Iraqi troops showed our commanders on the ground and showed the American people that they're becoming more and more capable of performing their duty to provide security to the Iraqi people.

Now, you've got to understand that just because the elections went forward that doesn't mean these Saddamists, Zarqawi types are going to lay down their arms. They're not. There will still be violence. And there will still be some who believe that they can affect the political outcome of Iraq through violent means. We understand that. And we're going to stay on the offense against these - "we" being coalition forces, as well as the Iraqi forces. But the recent elections have served as a real defeat for the rejectionists, and the Saddamists and al Qaeda types. Sunni Arabs who had boycotted the process, joined the process. And as they did so, those who want to stop the progress of freedom are becoming more and more marginalized inside of Iraq.

So in 2006, the mission is to continue to hand over more and more territory and more and more responsibility to Iraqi forces. A year ago there was only a handful of Iraqi army and police battalions ready for combat, ready to take the lead; today, there are more than 125 Iraqi combat battalions fighting the enemy, and 50 of those are in the lead. That's progress. And it's important progress, and it's an important part of our strategy to win in Iraq. And as these forces become more battle-hardened and take the lead, we're going to see continued confidence in the Iraqi people of the Iraqis being able to defend themselves, and that's important. And as we see more of these Iraqi forces in the lead, we'll be able to continue with our desire, our stated strategy that says as Iraqis stand up, we'll stand down.

The commanders have recently determined that we can reduce our combat forces in Iraq from 17 to 15 brigades. And the reason they were able to do so is because the Iraqis are more capable. The adjustment is underway. This adjustment will result in a net decrease of several thousand troops below the pre-election baseline of 138,000 U.S. troops in Iraq. The decrease comes in addition to a reduction of about 20,000 troops who were in Iraq to assist with security during the December elections.

Later this year, if Iraqis continue to make progress on the security and political sides that we expect, we can discuss further possible adjustments with the leaders of a new government in Iraq. But my decisions will be based upon conditions on the ground and the recommendation of our commanders, not based by false political timetables in Washington, D.C. I'm not going to let politics get in the way of doing the right thing in Iraq, and the American people have got to understand that.

We've also got the opportunity to change our composition of our forces inside Iraq. In 2006, we expect Iraqis will take more and more control of the battle space, and as they do so, we will need fewer U.S. troops to conduct combat operations around that country. More of our forces will be dedicated to training and supporting the Iraqi units. In the coming year, we will continue to focus on helping Iraqis improve their logistics and intelligence capabilities so more Iraqi units can take the fight and can sustain themselves in the fight.

We're also going to spend a lot of time on police training. An important part of our strategy is not only to have a competent Iraqi army, but police forces that are capable of earning the confidence of the Iraqi citizens. To restore security, Iraq has got to have capable police forces. And the recent reports of

abuses by some of the Iraqi police units are troubling, and that conduct is unacceptable. Our commanders understand that, the Secretary understands that, and I know that.

To stop such abuses and increase the professionalism of the Iraqi police, General Dempsey, who is in charge of training, and others are working with the Iraqis to continue making adjustments in the way the forces are trained. First, we're going to work with the Iraqi government to increase the training Iraqi police recruits receive in human rights and the rule of law, so they understand the role of the police in a democratic society.

Second, we're training Iraqi police with a program that has been effective with the Iraqi army. In other words, when we find something that works, we'll do it. And if we find something that's not working, we change -- and that is to embed coalition transition teams inside Iraqi special police units. Embedding our folks inside Iraqi army units has worked. One reason why these Iraqi units are better able to take the lead is because they've worked side-by-side with American specialists and experts, some of our best troops. So we're going to embed these type of soldiers with the Iraqi police forces, as well.

These transition teams will be made up of our officers, as well as noncommissioned officers. The coalition teams will go in the field with the police; they'll provide real-time advice and important assistance on patrol and during operations. And between operations they're going to train the Iraqi officers; they're going to help them become increasingly capable and professional so they can serve and protect all the Iraqi people without discrimination.

As we train not only the soldiers, but the police, our special units will continue hunting down al Qaeda and their affiliates. See, al Qaeda thinks they can use Iraq as a safe haven from which to launch attacks. That's their stated objective. I'm not making this up. Nobody in -- this is what Zawahiri and Zarqawi discussed. They said, let's drive America out of Iraq so we can use Iraq as a safe haven. We're going to train Iraqis, we'll train their army and train their police, and at the same time, we've got some of the finest soldiers ever on the hunt to bring Zarqawi and his buddies to justice.

The second front is in Afghanistan. The second major front in this global war against these terrorists is in Afghanistan, where we've made steady progress on the road to democracy. Karzai got elected; there's a sitting parliament. It's amazing how far Afghanistan has come from the days of the Taliban. General Abizaid told us in our briefing that new democracy is being increasingly defended by a capable Afghan army and police. The Afghan national army is now nearly 27,000 soldiers who are trained and equipped. General Abizaid tells us these soldiers are tough in battle. They want to defend their homeland. There are some 55,000 Afghan police officers on the beat. They're taking the fight to the enemy. They're working side-by-side with coalition forces to protect this new democracy.

They're receiving a lot of international support through the NATO Alliance. The NATO-led international security assistance force has now about 9,000 troops in the country that represents all 26 NATO allies and 10 non-NATO nations. In other words, the international community is stepping up. Like they have in Iraq, they're stepping up in Afghanistan, as well. In 2006, the force levels will increase by up to another 6,000 forces, to a total of approximately 15,000 personnel. In other words, you're going to see in 2006 an increase of international force inside of Afghanistan.

As NATO takes on a larger role in Afghanistan and as the capability of Afghan forces continues to grow, the United States will reduce force levels in Afghanistan from 19,000 to 16,500 this year. In other words, our strategy has been to provide a strong commitment to provide stability so democracy can flourish. And then as others, including Afghan troops, as well as NATO troops, step in, we step back. We're going to continue to conduct anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan, as well. This is a part of a global war against the terrorist network.

I said after September the 11th we would do everything in our power to bring justice to the enemy that attacked the American people, and I meant it. And part of chasing down the Taliban and al Qaeda is to find them where they hide. And just like in Iraq, we're going to have our special forces stay on the hunt. And we'll continue training at the same time.

There's a lot of work to be done in this war on terror, but the American people can be rest assured this administration understands the task, and understands the challenges, and understands our obligation to protect you, to protect the American people.

During the past year we lost some really good folks who wore the uniform of the United States of America. We pray for their loved ones. We pray for the comfort of those who had a sorrowful holiday season because a seat at the table was empty. And we vow to those that we will complete our mission: We will lay that foundation of peace for generations to come; that we'll do our duty to protect this country by not only bringing justice to an enemy that wants to do us harm, but by spreading freedom and democracy.

Thank you very much.

END 11:46 A.M. EST

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