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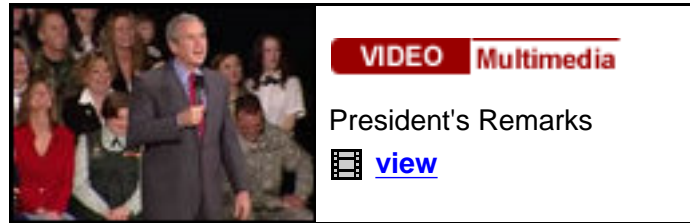
For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
March 22, 2006

President Discusses War on Terror, Progress in Iraq in West Virginia

Capitol Music Hall
Wheeling, West Virginia

-  [In Focus: Renewal in Iraq](#)
-  [In Focus: National Security](#)

12:17 P.M. EST



THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all very much. Please be seated. Thanks for coming. First of all, Terry, thanks for the invitation. My purpose is to share with you what's on my mind, and then I look forward to hearing what's on yours.

I regret only one thing, Terry, and that's that Laura didn't come with me. No, I know, most people generally say, you should have brought her and you should have stayed at home. (Laughter.) They love Laura, and so do I. And she is a fantastic First Lady. She is a great -- (applause.) And she is a great source of comfort and strength for me, and I wish she were here.

I want to thank the Chamber and the Board of Directors of the Chamber for allowing me to come. You know, I'm -- as Terry said, I'm the Commander-in-Chief; I'm also the Educator-in-Chief. And I have a duty to explain how and why I make decisions. And that's part of the reason I'm here.

I want to thank your Governor for being here. Joe Manchin is a -- (applause.) He's a good, decent man. He showed his heart during the mine tragedies. He asked the country -- (applause.) He represented the best of West Virginia. He showed great compassion, great concern. He asked the nation to pray on behalf of the families. We still must continue to pray for those who lost their loved ones. (Applause.) Joe is a problem-solver, see. He said, we're going to deal with this issue head on. And I appreciate you working closely with the federal government to make sure that there are safety regulations that work, that the inspection process works so that the miners here in this important state are able to do their job and their families can be secure in them doing their job.



So, Joe, thank you very much for your leadership. Thanks for bringing Gayle. Like you, I married well,

too. (Laughter and applause.)

I appreciate Congresswoman Shelley Moore Capito. Thanks for being here. I appreciate working with you. (Applause.) She's a good one, as we say in Texas. (Laughter.) I probably shouldn't bring up Texas too much today, given the fact -- yeah, I know -- (laughter.) Never mind. (Laughter.) I'm a little worried for my Long Horns, though, I tell you that. I'm fully informed -- (applause.) I'm fully informed that they're going to play a fine team.

I want to thank the Mayor for being here. Mr. Mayor, I'm honored that you were at the airport. I appreciate you coming. Thanks for serving your great community. God bless you, sir. (Applause.)

Members of the statehouse greeted me. I appreciate Senator Mike Oliverio. He's here. Mike I think did the country a great service when he worked on behalf of Judge Sam Alito to get him approved by the United States Senate. I appreciate your -- I want to thank you for that, Mike. (Applause.) I want to thank -- Mike said, don't hold it against me, I'm a Democrat. I said, Mike, what we -- first and foremost, we're all Americans. (Applause.)

I thank Chris Wakim. He also was out at the airport. It's a little chilly for you all standing out there without your overcoats on, but it's all right. Thanks for being here, Chris. Thanks to all the members of the statehouse and local officials who've joined us today. Thank you for serving your state and your community.

I want to thank John Anderson and Janis LaFont. They're from the -- Valley National Gases employees. They presented me with a check for \$100,000 for the Katrina Relief Fund. They represent -- (applause.) I want to thank you all for doing, and I want to thank the folks you work with for doing that.



It's an amazing country, isn't it, when you think about it, that folks right here in this part of West Virginia care enough about folks in the southern part of our country that they would take some of their hard-earned money and contribute to a relief fund so people can get their lives back together. It means a lot to the people in Louisiana and Mississippi to know that there is love and compassion for their -- and concern for their lives here in West Virginia.

Ours is an incredible nation. And you're going to hear me talk about our military. And if you ask questions about the economy, you'll hear me talk about our economy. But I want to remind everybody that the true strength of America lies in the hearts and souls of our citizens. That's where America is its greatest. And I appreciate you representing that. (Applause.)

I met a woman named Kristen Holloway at the airport. Kristen, where are you? There you go. Gosh, you thought you had a better seat, but nevertheless -- (laughter.) She came out to say hello. I had a chance to thank her for her being the founder of Operation Troop Appreciation. She has decided to

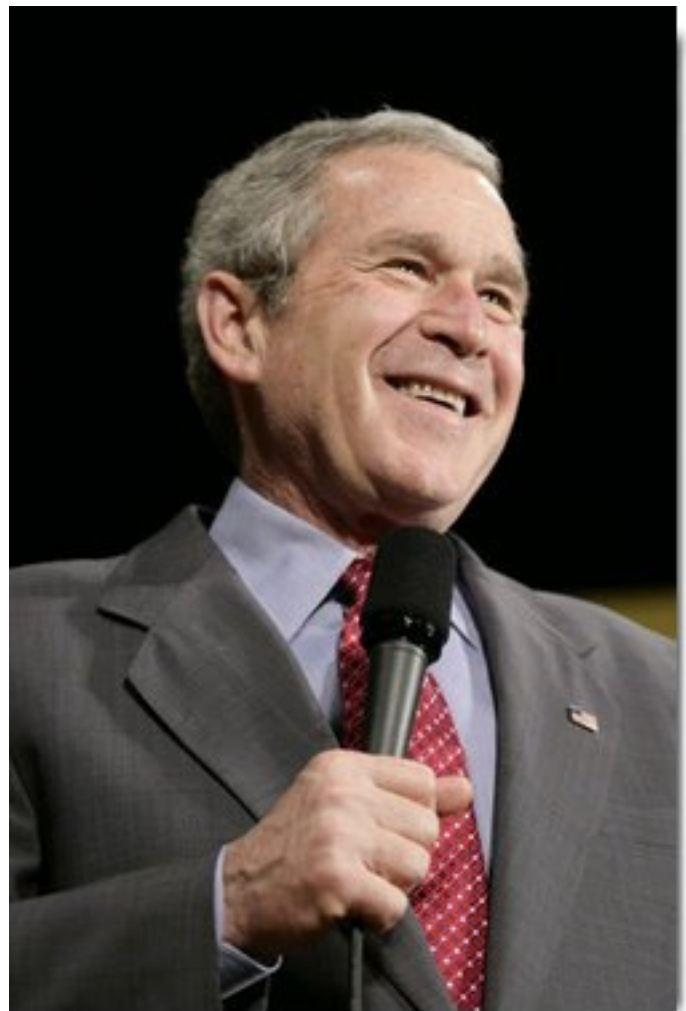
support those who wear our uniform in any way she can. Listen, I understand war is controversial, and I'm going to talk about the war. But America has got to appreciate what it means to wear the uniform today, and honor those who have volunteered to keep this country strong. (Applause.)

It doesn't matter whether -- it doesn't matter whether you agree with my decision, or not. But all of us should agree with the fact that we have a remarkable country, when people who know that they're going to be sent into harm's way raise their hand and say, I volunteer to serve. And no state has presented -- had more people volunteering to serve than the great state of West Virginia. (Applause.) Now, they'll say, maybe some states have more people, but they got greater populations. But 75 percent of your National Guard has gone into harm's way. And we appreciate that service. And I want to thank those of you who wear the uniform for your service. I want to thank your loved ones for supporting those who wear the uniform. And I want you to hear loud and clear, the United States of America stands with you and appreciates what you're doing. (Applause.)

The enemy, a group of killers, struck us on September the 11th, 2001. They declared war on the United States of America. And I want to share some lessons about what took place on that day. First of all, I knew that the farther we got away from September the 11th, 2001, the more likely it would be that some would forget the lessons of that day. And that's okay. That's okay, because the job of those of us who have been entrusted to protect you and defend you is really to do so in such a way that you feel comfortable about going about your life, see. And it's fine that people forget the lessons. But one of my jobs is to constantly remind people of the lessons.

The first lesson is, is that oceans can no longer protect us. You know, when I was coming up in the '50s in Midland, Texas, it seemed like we were pretty safe. In the '60s it seemed like we were safe. In other words, conflicts were happening overseas, but we were in pretty good shape here at home. And all that was shattered on that day when cold-blooded killers hijacked airplanes, flew them into buildings and the Pentagon, and killed 3,000 of our citizens. In other words, they declared war, and we have got to take their declaration of war seriously. The most important responsibility of the Commander-in-Chief and those who wear the uniform and those who are elected to public office is to defend the citizens of this country. That is our most vital and important responsibility. I have never forgotten that, from September the 11th on. It's just been a part of my daily existence.

Secondly, the best way to defend America is to stay on the offense. The best way to protect you is to rally all the strength of national government -- intelligence and military and law enforcement and financial strength -- to stay on the offense against an enemy that I believe wants to hurt us again. And



that means find them where they hide, and keep the pressure on, and never relent, and understand that you can't negotiate with these folks, there is no compromise, there is no middle ground. And so that's exactly what we're doing.

And there's some unbelievably brave troops and intelligence officers working around the clock to keep an enemy that would like to strike us again on the move, and to bring them to justice. And we're making progress about dismantling al Qaeda. Al Qaeda, after all, was the enemy that launched the attacks.

The second part of a lesson that we must never forget is the enemy, in that they're not a nation state -- in other words, they don't represent a nation state like armies and navies used to do -- need safe haven. They need places to hide so they can plan and plot. And they found safe haven, as you all know, in Afghanistan. And they were supported by a government that supports their point of view, which is a government that absolutely can't stand freedom. That was the Taliban. If you were a young girl growing up under the auspices of the Taliban, you didn't have a chance to succeed. You couldn't go to school. If you dissented in the public square, you'd be in trouble. If you didn't agree with their dark vision, whether it be religion or politics, you were in trouble. In other words, they can't -- they couldn't stand this concept of a free society -- and neither can al Qaeda. See, we're dealing with ideologues. They have an ideology.



Now, I understand some say, well, maybe they're just isolated kind of people that are angry and took out their anger with an attack. That's not how I view them. I view them as people that believe in something; they have an ideological base. They subverted a great religion to meet their needs, and they need places to hide. And that's why I said early on in the war that if you harbor a terrorist, you're equally as guilty as the terrorist, understanding the nature of the enemy, and understanding they need safe haven. In order to protect ourselves, we must deny them safe haven.

By the way, if the President says something he better mean it, for the sake of peace. In other words, you want your President out there making sure that his words are credible. And so I said to the Taliban, get rid of al Qaeda, or face serious consequences. They didn't, and they faced serious consequences, and we liberated Afghanistan. We removed the Taliban from power. We denied al Qaeda safe haven. And that young country, that young democracy is now beginning to grow; 25 million people are liberated as a result of the United States defending itself. And that's important for us to realize, that not only are we defending ourselves, but in this instance, we've given chance to people to realize the beauties of freedom.

An interesting debate in the world is whether or not freedom is universal, see, whether or not -- people say, there's old Bush imposing his values. See, I believe freedom is universal. I believe liberty is a universal thought. It's not an American thought, it is a universal thought. And if you believe that, then you ought to take great comfort and joy in helping others realize the benefits of liberty. The way I put it is, there is an Almighty God. One of the greatest gifts of that Almighty God is the desire for people to

be free, is freedom. And therefore -- (applause) -- and therefore, this country and the world ought to say, how can we help you remain free? What can we do to help you realize the blessings of liberty?

Remember, as we debate these issues -- and it's important to have a debate in our democracy, and I welcome the debate -- but remember, we were founded on the natural rights of men and women. That speaks to the universality of liberty. And we must never forget the origin of our own founding, as we look around the world.



Afghanistan -- I went there with Laura. We had a good visit with President Karzai. I like him -- good man. You can imagine what it's like to try to rebuild a country that had been occupied and then traumatized by the Taliban.

They're coming around. They got elections. They had assembly elections. He, himself, was elected. We expect them to honor the universal principle of freedom. I'm troubled when I hear -- deeply troubled when I hear the fact that a person who has converted away from Islam may be held to account. That's not the universal application of the values that I talked about. Look forward to working with the government of that country to make sure that people are protected in their capacity to worship.

There's still a Taliban element trying to come and hurt people. But the good news is, not only do we have great U.S. troops there, but NATO is now involved. One of my jobs is to continue to make sure that people understand the benefits of a free society emerging in a neighborhood that needs freedom. And so I'm pleased with the progress, but I fully understand there's a lot more work to be done.

Another lesson of September the 11th, and an important lesson that really does relate to the topic I want to discuss, which is Iraq, is that when you see a threat now, you got to take it seriously. That's the lesson of September the 11th -- another lesson of September the 11th. When you see a threat emerging, you just can't hope it goes away. If the job of the President is to protect the American people, my job then is to see threats and deal with them before they fully materialize, before they come to hurt us, before they come and strike America again.

And I saw a threat in Iraq. I'll tell you why I saw a threat. And by the way, it just wasn't me. Members of the United States Congress in both political parties saw a threat. My predecessor saw a threat. I mean, my predecessor saw a threat and got the Congress actually to vote a resolution that said, we're for regime change. That's prior to my arrival. The world saw a threat. You might remember I went to the United Nations Security Council; on the 15-to-nothing vote, we passed Resolution 1441 that said to Saddam Hussein, disclose, disarm or face serious consequences. We saw a threat.

I'll tell you why I saw a threat. I saw a threat because, one, he'd been on the state -- he was a state sponsor of terror. In other words, our government -- not when I was President, prior to my presidency -- declared Saddam Hussein to be a state sponsor of terror. Secondly, I know for a fact he had used weapons of mass destruction. Now, I thought he had weapons of mass destruction; members of Congress thought he had weapons of mass destruction; the world thought he had weapons of mass destruction. That's why those nations voted in the Security Council. I'm finding out what went wrong. In

other words, one of the things you better make sure of when you're the President, you're getting good intelligence, and, obviously, the intelligence broke down. But he had that capacity to make weapons of mass destruction, as well. He had not only murdered his own people, but he had used weapons of mass destruction on his own people.

That's what we knew prior to the decision I made. He also was firing on our aircraft. They were enforcing a no-fly zone, United Nations no-fly zone, the world had spoken, and he had taken shots at British and U.S. pilots. He'd invaded his neighborhood. This guy was a threat. And so the world spoke. And the way I viewed it was that it was Saddam Hussein's choice to disclose, disarm, or face serious consequences. And he made the choice, and then I was confronted with a choice. And I made my choice. And the world is better off without Saddam Hussein in power. (Applause.)

The biggest threat America faces is that moment when terror and weapons of mass destruction come together. And if we ever suspect that's happening, we got to deal with that threat seriously. Committing our troops into harm's way is the most difficult decision a President can make. I'm going to meet with some -- two families of those who lost a loved one. It's my duty to do so. I'm looking forward to being able to hug them, weep with them. And so for anybody out there in West Virginia who thinks it's easy to commit troops -- it's hard. It's the last option of the President, not the first option. The first option is to deal with things diplomatically; is to rally the world, to send a clear message that the behavior, in this case, of Saddam Hussein was intolerable. And we did that.

Now the fundamental question is: Can we win in Iraq? And that's what I want to talk about. First of all, you got to understand that I fully understand there is deep concern among the American people about whether or not we can win. And I can understand why people are concerned. And they're concerned because the enemy has got the capacity to affect our thinking. This is an enemy who will kill innocent people in order to achieve an objective. And Americans are decent, honorable people, they care. We care about human life. We care about human dignity. We value life. We value the life of our own citizens, and we value the life of other citizens. And so it's easy for an enemy that is willing to kill innocent people to affect us.

The enemy has told us their objectives in Iraq. And I think it's important for the Commander-in-Chief to take the words of the enemy very seriously. They have said that they want to spread their philosophy to other parts of the Middle East. They have said that. They have said they want to attack us again. They believe that democracies are soft, that it's just a matter of time for the United States to lose our will and create a vacuum in Iraq so they can use their terror techniques and their willingness to kill to develop a safe haven from which to launch attacks. That's what the enemy has said. This is -- I hope the citizens of this country understand that we have intercepted documents and we put them out for people to see. I take the words very seriously.

Iraq is a part of the global war on terror. In other words, it's a global war. We're dealing with a group of folks that want to spread an ideology, and they see a problem developing in Iraq, and so they're heading into Iraq to fight us, because they can't stand the thought of democracy. Democracy trumps their ideology every time. Freedom and democracy represent hope; their point of view represents despair. Freedom represents life and the chance for people to realize their dreams; their philosophy says, you do it my way or else. And so they're trying to fight us in Iraq.

And we have a strategy for victory in Iraq. It's a three-pronged strategy, starting with -- it's politics, it is a -- it's security, and it's economy. On politics, was to get the people to the polls to see if they even cared about democracy, give them a chance to vote, see what the people thought. And you might remember the elections -- it probably seems like an eternity. It was just a year ago that they started voting -- a little more than a year, in January of last year. And the first election round came off okay, but the Sunnis didn't participate. They were a little disgruntled with life there. They liked their privileged status and they were boycotting the elections. Then they wrote a constitution, which is a good constitution. It's a progressive constitution for that part of the world. More people came out to vote than last December. About 75 percent of the eligible voters said, I want to be free; I want democracy; I don't care what Mr. Zarqawi and his al Qaeda killers are trying to do to me, I'm going to defy them, and go to the polls.

And the people have spoken. And now it's time for a government to get stood up. There's time for the elected representatives -- or those who represent the voters, the political parties, to come together and form a unity government. That's what the people want; otherwise they wouldn't have gone to the polls, would they have?

I spoke to our Ambassador today, and General Casey, via video conferencing, and we talked about the need to make it clear to the Iraqis, it's time; it's time to get a government in place that can start leading this nation and listening to the will of the people. It's a little hard. You can imagine what it's like coming out of the -- having been ruled by a tyrant. People are -- when you spoke out before, no telling what was going to happen to you. It generally wasn't good. And now people are beginning to realize democracy has taken hold.

By the way, if you look at our own history, it was a little bumpy on our road, too. You might remember the Articles of Confederation. They didn't work too well. It took us a while from the moment of our revolution to get our Constitution written, the one that we now live by.

The second part is to help people with their economy. And we had to change our strategy there. We first went in there and said, let's build some big plants. The problem was the big plants served as big targets for those who are disgruntled, the terrorists who are going into Iraq to use it as a safe haven, plus some of their allies, the Saddamists. These were Saddam's inner-circle buddies and stuff like that that had received special privileges. They weren't happy that they were no longer in privileged status. And so they were destroying some of the infrastructure we were building. So we changed our strategy and said, look, why don't we go with smaller projects, particularly in the provinces, so people can begin to see the benefits of what it means to have a democracy unfold.

And the third aspect is security. When we got in there, it became apparent to our troops on the ground that we had a lot of training to do. We had to really rebuild an army to make sure that people had the skills necessary to be able to fight off those who want to stop the march of democracy. First we trained the army for threats from outside the country. But we realized the true threats were inside the country, whether it be the Saddamists, some Sunni rejectionists, or al Qaeda that was in there torturing and killing and maiming in order to get their way.

And we're making progress when it comes to training the troops. More and more Iraqis are taking the

fight. Right after the bombing of the Golden Mosque, for example, is an interesting indication as to whether or not the Iraqi troops are getting better.

The enemy can't defeat us militarily, by the way. They can't beat us on the field of battle. But the only thing they can do is they can either try to stop democracy from moving -- they failed on that. Last year, they failed. Their stated objective was just not to let democracy get going, and they flunked the test. Now they're trying to foment a civil war. See, that's the only way they can win. And they blew up the mosque. And there was some awful violence, some reprisals taking place. And I can understand people saying, man, it's all going to -- it's not working out. But the security forces did a pretty good job of keeping people apart.

In other words, it was a test. It was a test for the security forces, and it was a test for the Iraqi government. The way I like to put it is they looked into the abyss as to whether or not they want a civil war or not, and chose not to. That's not to say we don't have more work to do, and we do -- (applause.) But it's important for me to continue -- look, I'm an optimistic guy. I believe we'll succeed. Let me tell you this -- put it to you this way: If I didn't think we'd succeed, I'd pull out troops out. I cannot look mothers and dads in the eye -- (applause) -- I can't ask this good Marine to go into harm's way if I didn't believe, one, we're going to succeed; and, two, it's necessary for the security of the United States. (Applause.)

And it's tough fighting. It's tough fighting, because we got an enemy that's just cold-blooded. They can't beat us militarily, but they can try to shake our will. See, remember, I told you, they have said that it's just a matter of time, just a matter of time before the United States loses its nerve. I believe we're doing the right thing, and we're not going to retreat in the face of thugs and assassins. (Applause.) Thank you.

It's the Iraqis' fight. Ultimately, the Iraqis are going to have to determine their future. They made their decision politically; they voted. And these troops that we're training are going to have to stand up and defend their democracy. We got work, by the way, in '06 to make sure the police are trained as adequately as the military, the army. It's their choice to make. And I like to put it this way: As they stand up, we'll stand down.

But I want to say something to you about troop levels, and I know that's something that people are talking about in Washington a lot. I'm going to make up my mind based upon the advice of the United States military that's in Iraq. I'll be making up my mind about the troop levels based upon recommendations of those who are on the ground. I'm going to make up my mind based upon achieving a victory, not based upon polls, focus groups or election-year politics. (Applause.)

I talked about a city named Tal Afar the other day in a speech I gave in Cleveland. Just real quick, it's an important place. It's a place where -- close to the Syrian border, where al Qaeda was moving the terrorists from outside the country inside the country, trying to achieve their objective. And right after we removed Saddam Hussein, they started moving in. And I cannot describe to you how awful these people treat the citizens there. I mean, they are -- I told a story about a young boy who was maimed, taken to a hospital, was pulled out of the hospital, was killed by the terrorists. His dad went to retrieve him on the side of the road and they put a bomb underneath him and blew up the family. I mean,

Americans cannot understand the nature -- how brutal these people are. It's shocking what they will do to try to achieve their objectives.

But it really shouldn't shock us when you think about what they did on September the 11th. It's the same folks, same attitude, same frame of mind. But they're able to lock down cities, particularly those that are worried about their security, and so they basically took control of Tal Afar. So our troops went in with Iraqis and cleaned it out. The problem -- oh, not through yet. (Laughter.) A little early on the clap. (Laughter.) The problem was, we continued to pursue the enemy, and they moved back in, these killers and murderers moved back in, and just created a mess. I mean, they -- I said in my speech, they mortared children in a playground, they recruited young kids, abused them, violated them. There's one boy in particular who told our guys, once the city eventually got liberated, his dream was to behead somebody with a -- anyway, we started working with the local folks again. This time, though, we had trained more Iraqi army ready to go.

And the difference in the story between the first time we liberated Tal Afar from them and the recent liberation was that the Iraqis were in the lead. And not only were they in the lead, they stayed behind after we left. So our troops are chasing high-value targets and training, and capable Iraqi forces are providing security. And so the day of terror began to change when they saw capable forces and a new mayor and police forces.

I mean, this is -- it's hard to put ourselves in the shoes of the folks in this town that had been traumatized. But the strategy of clear, hold and build, began to create a sense of confidence. And what's interesting is, I can say that -- I got one datapoint that I can share with you -- the vote in the January '05 election was the second-lowest vote in the -- as percentage of voting population, in the country, and the last vote, 85 percent of the eligible voters voted. In other words, people had a sense of security and hope.

A free Iraq is important for the United States of America. It was important to remove a threat; it was important to deal with threats before they fully materialized; but a free Iraq also does some other things. One, it serves as an amazing example -- it will serve as an amazing example for people who are desperate for freedom.

You know, this is, I guess, quite a controversial subject, I readily concede, as to whether or not the United States ought to try to promote freedom in the broader Middle East. Our foreign policy before was just kind of, if the waters look calm, great. Problem is, beneath the surface was resentment brewing, and people were able to take advantage of that, these totalitarians, like al Qaeda. So I changed our foreign policy. I said, freedom is universal; history has proven democracies do not fight each other, democracies can yield peace we want, so let's advance freedom. And that's what's happening. (Applause.)

It's a big idea, but it's an old idea. It's worked in the past. I strongly believe that by promoting liberty we're not only protecting ourselves, but we're laying the foundation of peace for a generation to come. And I'll tell you why I believe that -- and then I'll answer questions. Thank goodness Laura isn't here, she'd be giving me the hook.

Two examples that I use that are obviously -- well, I'm living one example, and that is my relationship with the Prime Minister of Japan. He is one of my best buddies -- I don't know if you're supposed to call them "buddies" in diplomacy -- one of my best buddies in working to keep the peace. I find that a really interesting statement to say to you, knowing my own family's history -- 18-year-old -- my dad, when he was 18, went to fight the Japanese. I think it's really one of the interesting twists of history that I stand here in West Virginia saying to you that Prime Minister Koizumi and I talk about ways to keep the peace, ways to deal with North Korea, he's helping in Iraq, ways to deal with other issues. And 60 years prior to that, when the country called, George H. W. said, I want to go, just like, I'm sure, relatives of you all. And Japan was a sworn enemy. And there was a lot of bloodshed in order to -- remember, they attacked us, too. And yet, today, the President says, we're working to keep the peace. And what happened? It's an interesting lesson that I hope people remember. Something happened. What happened was, Japan adopted a Japanese-style democracy.

I believe freedom and liberty can change enemies into allies. I believe freedom has the power to transform societies. It's not easy work, it's difficult work. But we've seen history before. I know you've got relatives who were in World War II. On that continent, hundreds of thousands of Americans lost their lives in two world wars during the 1900s. And yet today, Europe is whole, free and at peace. What happened? Democracies don't war. And so part of my decision-making that I'm trying to explain to you today about war, about what you're seeing on your TV screens, about the anxiety that a lot of our citizens feel, is based upon, one, the need to protect the American people, and my deep reservoir of commitment to doing what it takes -- to look at the world realistically, to understand we're in a global war against a serious enemy.

But also my thinking is based upon some universal values and my belief that history can repeat itself, and that freedom and liberty has a chance to lay a foundation of peace so that maybe 40 years from now, somebody is speaking here in West Virginia saying, you know, a bunch of folks were given a challenge and a task, and that generation didn't lose faith in the capacity of freedom to change, and today, I'm able to sit down with the duly elected leaders of democracy in the Middle East, keeping the peace for the next generation to come. (Applause.)

That's what I've come to talk to you about, and that's what's on my mind. And now I'll be glad to answer any questions you got.

Yes, sir. First man up.

Q -- (inaudible) --

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, sir. (Applause.) I'll be glad to answer any question on any subject, but always appreciate a good editorial. (Laughter.)

Yes, sir. Hold on for a second. We're going to do it little more orderly here. Right here. Right there. Yes, there you go. Get moving on the mike, please. (Laughter.) Generally what happens if they don't have a mike, the guy yells the question, and I just answer whatever I want to answer. (Laughter.)

Q Mr. President, I have a son that's special forces in Iraq. And I have another son -- (applause.) I have

another son that's in the Army. He left college to join the Army. He's out in Hawaii. He's got the good duty right now. (Laughter.) But I thank God that you're our Commander-in-Chief. And I wouldn't want my boys -- (applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, thanks.

Q Again, I thank God you're our Commander-in-Chief. You're a man for our times. And I'm supporter of yours. And I think it's good that you come out and tell your story. And I think you need to keep doing more of it, and tell the story and the history of all this. And God bless you. And I thank you for your service.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I appreciate you saying that. (Applause.) A couple of points. First, you tell your kids thanks. The good news is, for moms and dads and husbands and wives and children, that, in spite of the debate you're seeing in Washington, that there is a commitment to support our troops when we -- when they're in harm's way. There may be an argument about tactics and whether or not we should have done it in the first place; I understand that. But the Congress has stood up, and that's what the Congress should do. And take comfort, please, sir, in knowing that the debates that you're seeing will not lessen our government's support for making sure the people are well-trained, well-paid, well-equipped, well-housed. We owe that. And I'm pleased with the congressional response to supporting troops.

Second, you can email them. It's an interesting war we have where moms and dads and wives and husbands are in touch with their loved ones by email. It's really interesting.

And I want to thank you very much for saying what you said. I am -- as I said, I'm Educator-in-Chief, and I'm going to spend a lot of time answering questions and just explaining -- explaining to people as clearly as I can about why I made decisions I made and why it is important for us to succeed.

And, again, I understand debate. I understand there's differences of opinion, and we should welcome that in America. People should never fear a difference of opinion, particularly on big matters. And war is a big matter, war and peace. And it's healthy for our country for people to be debating, so long as we don't send the wrong signals to our troops; so long as they don't think that we're not behind them; and so long as we don't send mixed signals to the enemy. The enemy believes that we will weaken and lose our nerve. And I just got to tell you, I'm not weak and I'm not going to lose my nerve. I strongly believe that we're doing the right thing. (Applause.)

Do you want to say something, Joe? How about the Governor? Make it easy.

GOVERNOR MANCHIN: -- (inaudible) --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I appreciate it.

Joe talked to me about how do we use the natural resources of the state of West Virginia in such ways to become less dependent on oil. (Applause.) Now, let me talk about that, starting with coal gasification

leading to coal liquification. I appreciate the subject.

I know it shocked some of you, I know it shocked some of you when I stood up in the State of the Union and said, we got a problem, we're addicted to oil. Texas, you know, the whole thing. (Laughter.) I'll tell you why I said it. I'll tell you why I said it. One, because when the demand for fossil fuels goes up, for non-renewable resources goes up in other parts of the world, it affects the gasoline price here at home. When somebody else's economy starts to boom and they start using more fossil fuel, it affects your price, too. It's important for people to understand. And there are some new economies emerging that are growing -- and that need and use -- that are using a lot of hydrocarbons.

Secondly, we get oil from parts of the world that don't like us, is the best way to put it, which creates a national security issue. And, therefore, it is in our economic interest and national interest that we get off of our addiction to oil. We import about 60-something percent of our oil from overseas. What Joe is talking about is a different use of resources to help us achieve that objective.

First thing is, we got a lot of coal, a 250-year supply of coal, which helps us on our electricity. And we're spending a lot of money on clean coal technology. The whole idea is to use taxpayers' money to develop a technology that will enable us to have zero-emission plants, which will help us achieve an environmental objective, as well as an energy independence objective.

Joe is talking about spending research money on the gasification of coal, which then will lead to the liquification -- in other words, we're able to develop a product that way. And I believe we ought to attack this issue on all fronts, on a variety of fronts. I know we ought to use nuclear power. It is a renewable source of energy that has got zero greenhouse gas effect.

And by the way, I went to a plant that's making solar panels, photovoltaic cells -- not bad for a history major. (Laughter.) Technologies are coming. And to me, it makes sense to work with Congress to spend money on new technologies aiming for a national objective.

The place where we're really going to effect reliance upon oil is changing our automobile -- how automobiles are powered. One is battery -- technologies are coming around. One of these days, I am told, that if we continue stay focused in research, you're going to be able to have a pretty good-sized vehicle, plug it in, and will be able to drive 40 miles before you need to use any gasoline in your engine. Now, that's not going to help some of you rural folks in West Virginia or Texas, but it's going to help urban people who generally tend not to drive more than 40 miles a day. But imagine if we're able to have battery power where you plug your battery into -- when the electricity is down, low usage at night, and they drive 40 miles. That will save -- that will reduce demand for gasoline, which reduces demand for crude oil.

Secondly, we're going to be able to drive our cars based upon -- with a sugar base, or a corn base, or sawgrass. I said that one day -- what the heck is sawgrass? It's just grass. It just grows out there, and you bulk it for them. And the idea is to develop technology so that we're using more ethanol. It's happening in the Midwest, by the way. They've got what they call E85, that's 85 percent ethanol that's powering automobiles now. A whole new industry is beginning to grow. And the more we use alternative sources of energy, the less dependent we are on oil.

So Joe has been -- Joe is always thinking, and he's a practical fellow, which is sometimes not the case in government. (Laughter.) But what he's saying is, can't we use our resources here, in a way, Mr. President, that helps you achieve a grand national objective, which is getting off Middle Eastern oil? And the answer is, yes, we can. (Applause.)

Yes, you got a question? Are you in school?

Q Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: Good. Did you use me as an excuse to skip school?

Q Of course. (Laughter.) Mr. President, I was wondering actually how you felt about America's double standard on nuclear energy, as far as countries like Iran, India, and Israel go?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I appreciate that. I may ask you to clarify your question of "double standard."

Q Well, how we don't allow Iran to have nuclear energy, yet we're supporting India.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, no, I got it, good, good, good.

Q And Israel's nuclear weapons --

THE PRESIDENT: I wouldn't -- I wouldn't necessarily -- well, first of all, let me explain the policy and then you can draw whatever conclusion you want. First of all, it's in our interests that India use nuclear power to power their economic growth because, as I told you, there is a global connection between demand for fossil fuels elsewhere and price here. And so I went to India and I said -- actually, it's a very sophisticated question, by the way -- but I said, we ought to encourage you to use nuclear power.

Now, the difficulty with that issue, and that Congress is going to have to deal with, is that India has heretofore been denied technologies from the United States because of previous decisions they made about nuclear weaponry. My attitude is that over 30 years they have proven themselves to be a nonproliferator, that they're a transparent democracy; it's in our interest that they develop nuclear power for -- to help their economy grow -- they need power and they need energy to do so -- and they're willing to go under the safeguards of the IAEA, which is an international forum to make sure that there are certain safeguards.

Iran -- the Iranians are a nontransparent society. They're certainly not a democracy. They are sponsors of terrorism. They have joined the IAEA, and yet we caught them cheating. In other words, they weren't upholding the agreements, and they started to try to enrich uranium in order to develop a weapons program. India is heading to the IAEA; the Iranians are ignoring IAEA.

And so to answer your question about potential conflict of civilian energy power, I have said that I support the Russian proposal that says the Iranians should have a civilian nuclear industry, however

Russia and other suppliers would give them the enriched -- the product necessarily to power their industry and collect the spent fuel, but not enable the Iranians to learn how to enrich in order to develop a weapons programs. That's I think how -- hold on for a second -- oop, oop, oop. (Laughter.) That's how we addressed the inconsistency on the power side, apparent inconsistency.

However, in that the Iranians are nontransparent, in that they are hostile to the United States and hostile to allies, we've got to be very careful about not letting them develop a weapon. And so we're now dealing with this issue diplomatically by having the Germans and the French and the British send a clear message to the Iranians, with our strong backing, that you will not have the capacity to make a weapon, the know-how to make a weapon. Iran with a nuclear weapon is a threat, and it's dangerous, and we must not let them have a weapon. (Applause.)

Yes.

Q Sir, thank you for being in West Virginia. I'm the recruiting commander of the West Virginia Army National Guard. And there are a lot of National Guardsmen here with you in Wheeling today. West Virginians are a proud and very patriotic people. I'd like for you to share with us what you would say to a young person today who would like to join the National Guard, and maybe give some encouraging words in that respect.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, thanks -- kind of doing your job for you. All right. (Laughter and applause.) My statement to all Americans is serve your country one way or another. I -- and service can be done by wearing the uniform. Wearing the uniform is a fantastic way to say, I want to serve my country. A lot of people have chosen that way, and it's a rewarding experience to wear the uniform. If you want to go to college, it's a good way to gain some skills to help you in your education.

There are also other ways to serve. You can mentor a child and you're serving America. You can help the Katrina victims and you're serving America. You can be a Boy Scout troop leader and you're serving America.

What's really interesting about our country -- and I said this early on -- is the notion of people coming together to serve a concept greater than themselves. It is -- I know it's not unique to America, but it certainly helps define our spirit. De Tocqueville, who's a French guy, came in 1832, and recognized -- and wrote back -- wrote a treatise about what it means to go to a country where people associate voluntarily to serve their communities. And he recognized that this -- one of the great strengths of America -- this is the 1830s -- it is still the strength of America. It is a vital part of our society and our communities, the idea of people volunteering to help a neighbor in need.

And one of my jobs is to honor people who are serving our country that way, and to call other people to service, as well. As you know, one of the interesting and at times controversial proposals was whether or not government should open up grant money for competitive bidding for faith-based organizations. I'm a big believer in providing grant money available for faith-based organizations, so long as the money doesn't go -- to be used to proselytize, but is used to help serve a purpose, like if your mother or dad is in prison, that it would help to go find a mentor for that child. Or if you're a drug addict, or got hooked on alcohol, that you could redeem the government help at a faith-based institution.

In other words, we in government ought to be asking the question, does the program work? And a lot of times, programs based upon faith do work, that it is -- there's nothing better than a faith-based program which exists to love a neighbor like you'd like to be loved yourself. (Applause.) And therefore, one of my jobs is to not only help recruit for the Guard, which -- put a plug in there for you, there you go -- but also to call other -- to call people to serve, to help change our society one person at a time. And it's happening. It's a remarkable part, I'm confident, of this community, just like it is all around the United States. And thanks for your question.

All right, yes, sir. Yes, the guy in the yellow hat. Give it to the guy on the aisle. Well, no, you're not a guy. (Laughter.) Right behind you, there you go.

Q President Bush, I'm a professional firefighter here in Wheeling, West Virginia.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, sir. (Applause.)

Q And back during 9/11, I lost over 300 of my brothers in New York. And I was glad that you were our President at that time and took the fight to the terrorists. But as I see you, I said earlier about the guy in Afghanistan that is going to convert to Christianity, he may get killed over there for doing that. Do you have an army of sociologists to go over there and change that country, or are you hoping that in a couple decades that we can change the mind-set over there?

THE PRESIDENT: I appreciate the question. It's a very legitimate question. We have got influence in Afghanistan and we are going to use it to remind them that there are universal values. It is deeply troubling that a country we helped liberate would hold a person to account because they chose a particular religion over another. And so we are -- we will make -- part of the messaging just happened here in Wheeling. I want to thank you for that question.

No, I think it's -- we can solve this problem by working closely with the government that we've got contacts with -- and will. We'll deal with this issue diplomatically and remind people that there is something as universal as being able to choose religion.

So thank you for the question. I understand your concerns. I share the same concerns.

I had a little guy back here. Yes, sir.

Q Do you like living in the White House?

THE PRESIDENT: Do I like living in the White House? (Applause.) Yes. That's a good, fair question. Your brother has got one, too. Do you want to back-to-back them?

Q -- (inaudible) --

THE PRESIDENT: Okay. Well, I've been the President for five and a half years. I do like living in the

White House. It's an interesting question -- for some practical reasons. I've got a 45-second commute to my office. (Laughter.) The food is pretty good. (Laughter.) It is a -- I've enjoyed every second of the presidency. That's probably hard -- like my buddies come up from Texas; one of the things that Laura and I are most proud of -- we're proud of a lot -- we're most proud of our girls, but we're also very proud of the fact that we had friends prior to being in politics from Texas that will be our friends after we're in politics. (Applause.)

And they come up from Texas, and they're kind of looking at you like, man, are you okay? Yes -- you know. (Laughter.) And I tell them, I say, you know, I can't tell you what an honor it is to do this job. They often ask, what's the job description? I say, making decisions. And I make a lot. Obviously, I'm trying to share with you -- you may not agree with the decision, but at the very minimum, I want you to understand that I make my decisions based upon some principles I hold dear. In order to make decisions, you have to be enthusiastic about your job, you have to be optimistic about the future, and you have to stand for something. You can't be a President trying to search for what you believe in the midst of all the noise in Washington. (Applause.)

Yes, ma'am. Yes. No, right here. There you go.

Q Good afternoon, Mr. President. It is an honor to be here today. Thank you for coming. Greetings from Columbus, Ohio.

THE PRESIDENT: There you go. (Applause.)

Q My husband, who is sitting right here with me --

THE PRESIDENT: Actually, my grandfather was raised in Columbus, Ohio -- not to change subjects, but --

Q That's okay, you can do whatever you want to do.

THE PRESIDENT: Prescott S. Bush. (Laughter.)

Q I have a comment, first of all, and then just a real quick question. I want to let you know that every service at our church you are, by name, lifted up in prayer, and you and your staff and all of our leaders. And we believe in you. We are behind you. And we cannot thank you enough for what you've done to shape our country. (Applause.)

This is my husband, who has returned from a 13-month tour in Tikrit.

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, yes. Thank you. Welcome back. (Applause.)

Q His job while serving was as a broadcast journalist. And he has brought back several DVDs full of wonderful footage of reconstruction, of medical things going on. And I ask you this from the bottom of my heart, for a solution to this, because it seems that our major media networks don't want to portray

the good. They just want to focus -- (applause) --

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, hold on a second.

Q They just want to focus on another car bomb, or they just want to focus on some more bloodshed, or they just want to focus on how they don't agree with you and what you're doing, when they don't even probably know how you're doing what you're doing anyway. But what can we do to get that footage on CNN, on FOX, to get it on headline news, to get it on the local news? Because you can send it to the news people -- and I'm sorry, I'm rambling -- like I have --

THE PRESIDENT: So was I, though, for an hour. (Laughter.)

Q -- can you use this, and it will just end up in a drawer, because it's good, it portrays the good. And if people could see that, if the American people could see it, there would never be another negative word about this conflict.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I appreciate that. (Applause.) No, it -- that's why I come out and speak. I spoke in Cleveland, gave a press conference yesterday -- spoke in Cleveland Monday, press conference, here today. I'm going to continue doing what I'm doing to try to make sure people can hear there's -- why I make decisions, and as best as I can, explain why I'm optimistic we can succeed.

One of the things that we've got to value is the fact that we do have a media, free media, that's able to do what they want to do. And I'm not going to -- you're asking me to say something in front of all the cameras here. (Laughter.) Help over there, will you? (Laughter.)

I just got to keep talking. And one of the -- there's word of mouth, there's blogs, there's Internet, there's all kinds of ways to communicate which is literally changing the way people are getting their information. And so if you're concerned, I would suggest that you reach out to some of the groups that are supporting the troops, that have got Internet sites, and just keep the word -- keep the word moving. And that's one way to deal with an issue without suppressing a free press. We will never do that in America. I mean, the minute we start trying to suppress our press, we look like the Taliban. The minute we start telling people how to worship, we look like the Taliban. And we're not interested in that in America. We're the opposite. We believe in freedom. And we believe in freedom in all its forms. And obviously, I know you're frustrated with what you're seeing, but there are ways in this new kind of age, being able to communicate, that you'll be able to spread the message that you want to spread.

Thank you for your concerns, and thank you for your prayer. I want to tell you something interesting about the job of President, and, frankly, I didn't anticipate this part of the presidency, but it's an amazing part of my job to know that millions of people pray for me. It's a -- (applause.) It really is. It's -- think about that. Strangers stand up and say, in front of a couple thousand people, I'm praying for you. And it helps. And I appreciate it, and I want to thank you for your prayers. It helps do the job, it helps keep perspective.

Yes, sir.

Q I'm a senior at the local high school, Wheeling Park High School, and I just want to know what your views are on what type of America my generation will lead.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, interesting question. First, I hope that your generation will lead -- no doubt, your generation will lead. Generations, when called, somehow find the courage to lead. That's step one. Two, I think you'll be dealing in a world in which you will be confronted with making values choices -- for example, family, understanding that the family is an important aspect of society. Secondly, the choice of life. For example, you'll be confronted with a very difficult debate between science, on the one hand, and the hopes of science, and life. And it's -- that debate is just beginning. In other words, do you destroy life to save life, for example, is one of the very difficult debates that your generation will be confronted with -- to what extent does science trump morality, as some see it.

You'll be confronted, hopefully, with a world that has been able to be free enough so that this war that's going on now is -- has kind of faded out. This war is not going to stop like that. It's not going to be like we'll have the signing ceremony somewhere. But it's a matter of marginalizing those who espouse violence and empowering those who love freedom.

You'll be confronted with a world in which -- we're seeing a little bit of it now in America -- whether or not we will be bold and confident in our economic policy to shape the future, or we'll be worried about competition and retreat within our borders. It's an interesting debate. My attitude is, as I said in the State of the Union, we cannot become an isolationist nation. But you'll be confronted with making that decision. If we're an isolationist nation, it means we'll just say, let them -- don't worry about them over there, let them deal with it themselves. If it's an isolationist nation, we won't worry about HIV/AIDS on the continent of Africa, which we should worry about. See, I believe to whom much is given, much is required, and that we have an obligation not only to help our folks here at home, but also to help save lives elsewhere.

And you'll be confronted with that decision. You'll be confronted with the decision as to whether or not we can confidently compete against nations like India and China on the economic front. And it will be an interesting challenge. We're facing that challenge somewhat now, and in my judgment, this is the beginning of what will be a constant set of decisions that future generations are going to have to make.

You'll be confronted with privacy issues -- privacy on the Internet, privacy in electronic medical records that I think ought to happen, in order to make sure we save costs in medicine. But you'll be confronted with making sure that these new technologies that we're going to use to help improve, for example, the information of medicine, that it doesn't encroach into your private business, into your life. That will be a confrontation that you'll have to deal with.

Anyway, you'll be confronted with some stuff. Hopefully, our job is to make sure you're confronted with less issues, like being hooked on oil. One of the issues that we're confronting with now that I hope you'll not have to confront with is jobs going elsewhere because our -- because we don't have the math and science skills, and engineering skills and physics skills that are taught to our children here. One of the really interesting challenges we have is to make sure not only the education of our children focuses on literacy, but there's literacy in math and science and physics and chemistry, where the jobs of the 21st century -- the skills necessary for the jobs of the 21st century. Hopefully, we'll have dealt with that.

Otherwise, you're going to be confronted with playing catch-up. And that's why it's important for us to get that job done.

You're going to be confronted with, unless we act now, a Social Security system and a Medicare system that's gone broke. (Applause.) I want to talk about that right quick, now I thought about it. No. (Laughter.) I think about it a lot because I see what's coming down the road -- a lot of baby boomers like me, turning 60 this year. I'll be retirement age in two years, in 2008. (Laughter.) Kind of convenient, isn't it? (Laughter.) And there's a lot of me -- people like me, a lot of people like me, a whole lot of baby boomers. That's one of those statistical facts that people got to pay attention to.

And interestingly enough, my generation has been promised more benefits than the previous generation. People are running for office saying, vote for me, I'm going to make sure this next generation gets a better deal than the previous generation. And because there was a lot of folks like me, being promised greater benefits, who are living longer -- I don't know how plan -- how other 60-year-olds, how long they plan to live -- I plan on kind of stretching her out, you know. And there are fewer people paying in the system for beneficiary. And so we got a problem coming. The system is going to go broke. And I addressed the issue last year, and I'm going to address the issue again and again and again to call Congress to the table. (Applause.)

My strategy last time was to go around the country and explain the problem, on the belief that once the people heard there was a problem they would then demand their representatives do something about the problem. It didn't work. There was no legislation last year. So I got another idea, and that is I'm going -- we're going to set up a group of members of Congress from both parties, both chambers, recognizing that nothing can get done on this issue unless it's a bipartisan issue -- and say, now is the time. That's what we're here for. We have been elected to confront problems and deal with them. That's what the people expect. And they're tired, by the way, of all the politics in Washington, D.C. They expect people to come together, to sit down at the table, and to solve this problem so you don't have to deal with it. (Applause.)

All right, last question. Then I got to go back to work. This isn't work. Yes, go ahead. Hold on for a minute. Please. Like -- I can't -- okay, two questions. Who yelled the loudest? You did? All right, go ahead. Then you're -- you're the last guy. You're next to last. You're last.

Q Mr. President, thank you again for coming. My question -- I believe that one of our greatest resources is our self-sufficiency. And as you drive down the road, you'll see that our community is dying because of the importation of cheap steel. I'd like to know what your plans are to help alleviate this.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. Well, as you know, right before -- right after I got elected I put a 201 in place that -- (applause) -- that was our way of providing breathing space so that the firm could adjust. And I fully understand the problems that the steel mills are going through here. The Governor spending a lot of time briefing me on that, on the way in, as did Shelley Moore. And it's -- obviously, it's going to require good energy policy -- your plant can exist if it's got decent energy and reliable supplies at reasonable prices. Your plant can exist, if you've got reasonable health care costs. And that's why it's important for us to do a variety of measures to help reduce the cost of health care. I just mentioned

one on information technology. Another is to get rid of these junk lawsuits that are running up the cost of medicine. (Applause.)

In order for you to be competitive, we got to make sure that products are treated fairly. As you know, I'm a free trader, but I also believe that people ought to treat the United States the way we treat them. If we're letting products coming in here, they ought to let our products in on the same basis. (Applause.) I believe that -- I'm aware of the issue you brought up, and thank you bringing it up.

Yes, sir. Final guy. Got to head back home. I hope you understand. Otherwise we'd be here all day. Wouldn't mind being here all day, but I got something else to do. (Laughter.)

Let her go.

Q Mr. President, I want to say it's a privilege and a blessing to be here with you.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

Q And thank you for having integrity since you've been in office, and character.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, sir. (Applause.)

Q I'm statewide field director for the campaign for Hiram Lewis for U.S. Senate. And as you close -- I appreciate what you had stated earlier about politicians. And as you close today, I did two years of volunteer work for the Republican Party while I worked a full-time job, and it paid off for me in this position now. And I see folks that are increasingly discouraged with the status quo, because the difference --

THE PRESIDENT: No campaign speeches.

Q No, sir, I'm not.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay.

Q My only question is, what would you say to those, whether Democrat or Republican, how could you encourage those that are dissatisfied with the status quo?

THE PRESIDENT: Right. No, I appreciate that. Look, it is really important for people to at least trust the decision-making process of those of us in public office. You may not agree with the decisions. You may not -- and look, I understand a lot of people don't agree, and that's fine, that's fine. But they've got to understand, at least in my case, that I'm making my decisions based upon what I think is right, and that making decisions that are the kind that I make, for example, got to be based upon a set of principles that won't change. People got to understand that.

When there's any doubt about the integrity of the public servant, like in Washington there has been

recently, they got to clean up -- they got to work to clean it up. There's got to be lobby reform in this case. I mean, the truth of the matter is, a couple of members of the House of Representatives disgraced the process. A person took money in order to put things in appropriations bills. That's unacceptable in our democracy. And it needs to be dealt with in order to be able to earn the confidence of the people.

I worry about lack of voter participation. I'm concerned that people don't participate at the ballot box. And it is something that we've all got to work on, because democracy is -- really depends upon the participation of our citizenry. It's really important for high school students. And one of the challenges you'll face is whether or not our democracy is able to continue to get people to say, I can make a difference in the ballot box.

And so, to answer your question, integrity is a central part of the process. Integrity in decision-making, integrity in how we deal with the people's money, integrity of -- and part of a system based upon integrity is one that deals with, like in this case, unethical behavior, very quickly, with certainty, so that people have got confidence in the system.

I appreciate you working in the process. I want to thank you for your question. I wish I could stay longer to answer your questions. I can't, I got to go back to D.C. I'm not necessarily saying I'm rather be in D. C. than here; I'd rather be here than there. But nevertheless, that's what my life dictates. God bless you all. (Applause.)

END 1:37 P.M. EST

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