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GEORGE W. BUSH

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Office of the Vice President
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Vice President's Remarks at a Rally for the Troops at Offutt Air Force Base

U.S. STRATCOM Headquarters
Omaha, Nebraska

1:15 P.M.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thank you. (Applause.) Thank you. (Applause.) Thank you very much, Hoss. And thank all of you. It's great to be back in Nebraska, the chance to visit Offutt Air Force Base once again. I appreciate all of you taking time out today to let me come by and say thank you.

I want to thank General George, obviously, the Commander of the 55th Wing, for hosting me today; and General Cartwright, Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command, for those kind words of introduction. (Applause.) There's got to be something okay for a general named Hoss. (Laughter.) I like that. I also want to recognize Congressman Jeff Fortenberry, who is with us today. And I'd also like to thank the Bellevue Chamber of Commerce, the Offutt Advisory Council, the towns of Papillion, La Platte and Omaha for the support and hospitality you provide to all of our folks here at Offutt. Thanks, as well, to a terrific group of musicians -- the Heartland of America Band. (Applause.)



Above all, I want to thank the hardworking men and women who make Offutt Air Force Base one of the finest military installations in the entire nation. (Applause.)

I've long admired the work that is done here, and Offutt was one of the first bases I visited after I became Secretary of Defense back in 1989. Located in the heart of America, the base is also at the very heart of America's national security strategy. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, units housed at Offutt Air Force Base are watching out for the security of the nation and the people who call it home. Our military has many superb military assets, but the decisive element is not equipment but rather courage and character. Your work ethic, your sense of duty, your deep commitment to our country -- these are the finest assets we have. So I count it an honor to be in your company, and I bring good wishes to each and every one of you from our Commander-in-Chief, President George W. Bush. (Applause.)

I am here today because the President and I want you to know how much we appreciate everything you do on behalf of the United States. You're serving in an eventful time for the country, and for the cause of freedom. Some of the challenges have arisen close to home. Just one year ago, personnel stationed here joined in the relief effort after the devastating hurricane. As part of Task Force Katrina, you conducted surveillance flights, provided security, set up temporary shelter and field hospitals for relief workers, and brought food and water to evacuees. You did an outstanding job in an hour of need, and I know the citizens of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast will never forget what you did for them.

As we gather today, another anniversary lies just ahead. In less than two weeks the calendar will again read September 11th -- and our minds will go back to that day five years ago, when the enemies of our country struck the homeland with acts of stealth and murder. To stand here at Offutt Air Force Base is to be reminded of how the world changed on that terrible morning. This is where President Bush came to direct the initial response to the attacks, and to conduct an emergency national security meeting by secure video. It's never a small matter when the President of the United States arrives on short notice. But that's the very kind of contingency that Offutt is prepared for -- and the support you provided to the President on 9/11 was nothing short of superb.



From that day to this, the work carried out by Team Offutt has helped to sustain the U.S. military in the global war on terror. That war goes on, and thanks in part to all of you, it's a war we are going to win. (Applause.)

In the aftermath of the tragedy, President Bush told the nation that the struggle ahead would be global in nature, that it would be lengthy and difficult, that it would require our best effort and unfailing resolve. This is precisely how the war on terror has unfolded. And in this fight some of the toughest, most urgent duties have come to our men and women in uniform. Fortunately for America, you've never let us down, and the nation has an awful lot to be grateful for.

America is grateful to the largest wing in the Air Force Air Combat Command -- the Fighting Fifty-Fifth. (Applause.) In an age when enemies view the entire world as battle space, there's no substitute for real-time, on-scene intelligence. And it's the Rivet Joint aircraft that ensures American air superiority and global response capability. At any given time, some 10 percent of the personnel of the 55th are deployed around the world -- so it's true "the sun never sets on the Fighting Fifty-Fifth." (Applause.) I especially want to recognize those who have just returned from their second Global War on Terror deployment: Thank you for a job well done, and welcome home. (Applause.)

America is grateful to the U.S. Strategic Command. STRATCOM carries a heavy responsibility in protecting the people of the United States. You're the ones we depend on to warn and defend this country against catastrophic attack, to maintain some of the most critical elements of our defense arsenal, and to position combat forces far from home. Across an incredible range of expertise -- intelligence, planning, targeting, space and information operations -- STRATCOM is helping us to track enemies and to maintain our edge in a time of testing. You carry out difficult work with precision, and

focus, and a consistent standard of excellence. All Americans are proud of the men and women of STRATCOM. (Applause.)

America is grateful, as well, to the Air Force Weather Agency -- keepers of quality, comprehensive climate data for customers around the world. And we're grateful to the citizen warriors of the Nebraska Air National Guard. (Applause.)

In waging the global war on terror, the men and women who wear the nation's uniform have reminded people everywhere of America's purposes. For the sake of our own security, and that of our friends, we've undertaken a lot of serious work in this world. Yet when we use our military, it's not to conquer, but to liberate. And after we throw back tyrants, we stand by our friends to ensure that democratic institutions can take hold, and to help build the freedom that leads to peace in the long run.

Five years ago Iraq and Afghanistan were both in the grips of violent, merciless regimes. Now they have democratically-elected governments, the dictators are gone, and 50 million people are awakening to a future of hope and freedom. And Americans who return home from that part of the world can be proud of their service for the rest of their lives. (Applause.)

We maintain forces in those countries because we're a nation that keeps its word and because we understand what is at stake in that part of the world. The terrorists understand it as well. The terrorists know that as freedom takes hold, the ideologies of hatred and resentment will weaken, and the advance of free institutions in the broader Middle East will produce a much safer world for our children and our grandchildren. The war on terror is a battle for the future of civilization. It's a battle worth fighting. It's a battle we are going to win. (Applause.)

The terrorists have made Iraq the central front in this war. And we wage this fight with good allies at our side, including an Iraqi Security Force growing in size and ability. We'll continue to train the Iraqi forces so they can defend their own country and make it a source of stability in an otherwise troubled region. When it comes to our own troop levels, the President will listen to the recommendations of commanders on the ground. And he will make the call based on what is needed for victory, not according to the polls, and not by artificial timelines set by politicians in Washington, D.C. (Applause.)

In our own country, we take democratic values seriously -- so we always have a vigorous debate on the issues. That's part of the greatness of America; we wouldn't have it any other way. But there is a difference between healthy debate and self-defeating pessimism. We have only two options in Iraq -- victory or defeat. And I want you to know, as members of the United States military, that the American people do not support a policy of retreat or defeat. We want to complete the mission. We want to get it done right. And we want to return with honor. (Applause.)

Although we've been in the struggle against terrorism for nearly five years now, the terrorists were actually at war with this country long before 2001. And they were the ones on the offensive. Over time, they came to believe that they could strike America without paying a price -- because they did so many times in the 1980s and '90s. Eventually, of course, they hit us here at home on September 11th, 2001.

On September 11th, the American people had a glimpse of the broader ambitions these enemies want

to achieve, as well as the kind of world they want to create. These enemies pervert a religious faith to serve a dark political objective -- to establish, by violence and intimidation, a totalitarian empire that denies all political and religious freedom. To achieve that vision, the terrorists want to demoralize free nations with dramatic acts of murder, and to gain weapons of mass destruction so they can hold power by threat or blackmail. We need not have any illusions about their ambitions, because the terrorists have stated them very clearly. They have killed many thousands in many countries. They would, if able, kill hundreds of thousands more -- and still not be finished.

This is not an enemy that can be ignored, or negotiated with, or appeased. And every retreat by civilized nations is an invitation to further violence against us. Men who despise freedom will attack freedom in any part of the world -- and so, responsible nations have a duty to stay on the offensive, together, to remove this threat. We are working to prevent attacks before they occur, by tracking down the terrorists wherever they dwell. We are working to deny weapons of mass destruction to outlaw states and their terrorist allies. And we are working to prevent any nation from becoming a staging ground for further terrorist violence. And we are working to deny the terrorists future recruits, by replacing hatred and resentment with democracy and hope across the broader Middle East.

The task of protecting America includes, as well, a home front -- and the home front is every bit as important as the battlefields overseas. To protect Americans, the President signed the Patriot Act, which is helping us disrupt terrorist activity, to break up terror cells within the United States, and to protect the lives of Americans. Another vital step the President took in the days following 9/11 was to authorize the National Security Agency to intercept a certain category of terrorist-linked international communications. There are no communications more important to the safety of the United States than those related to al Qaeda that have one end in the United States. If you'll recall, the report of the 9/11 Commission focused criticism on our inability to uncover links between terrorists at home and terrorists abroad. The authorization the President made after September 11th helped address that problem in a manner that is fully consistent with the constitutional responsibilities and the legal authority of the President, and consistent with the civil liberties of the American people.

As people who know first-hand what this war really involves, you can be certain of this: The President will not relent in tracking the enemies of the United States with every legitimate tool in his command. This is not a war we can win on the defensive. Our only option against these enemies is to monitor them, to find them, to fight them, and to destroy them. (Applause.)

I'm afraid that as we get farther away from September 11th, 2001 there is a temptation to let up in the fight against terror. We're all grateful that this nation has gone half a decade without another 9/11. Obviously, no one can guarantee that we won't be hit again. But getting through almost five years of wartime without an attack on the homeland took a lot more than luck. We've been protected by sound policy decisions by the President, by decisive action at home and abroad, and by round-the-clock efforts on the part of people in the armed forces, in law enforcement, in intelligence, and homeland security. The enemy that struck on 9/11 is weakened and fractured, yet still lethal, still determined to hit us again.

Remember the plot uncovered just this month in the United Kingdom. It was aimed at U.S. commercial flights headed over the Atlantic. We've never had a fight like this -- we have a lot more to do before it's finished. Either we are serious about fighting this war or we are not. And the enemies of America need

to know: We are serious, we will not let down our guard. (Applause.)

Everywhere I go in this country, I am struck by the depth of gratitude and admiration that Americans have for the people who serve in our military. We don't take freedom for granted, because we know that it came at a price. Many Americans have been decorated for acts of bravery and superior performance. And we have had to say a last farewell to some heroic men and women. The families left behind need to know that their loved ones served in a noble and a necessary cause, and their sacrifice has made our nation and the world more secure. We will honor their memory forever. (Applause.)

Ladies and gentlemen, on a Tuesday morning five years ago, the nation we love experienced one of the cruelest acts the modern world has seen. In our sorrow we felt inspiration, as we learned of airline passengers who rose up against hijackers to prevent greater loss, and rescuers who charged into burning towers and died by the hundreds, and the many examples of kindness and brotherhood that Americans showed to each other on one of the worst days in our history.

From that hour of destruction to this very moment, the people and the government of the United States have answered violence with justice, honor, and moral courage. America is a good, and decent, and generous country. The ideals that gave life to this nation are the same ideals we uphold at home and that we serve abroad. We fight not only to protect ourselves and to overcome dangers to civilization, but to free the oppressed, and to give others the chance to decide their own destiny, so that all of us can one day live in peace on the foundation of human freedom.

Every day you go on duty, it is to uphold these ideals. Every day you go on duty, you make this nation safer, and you show the world that the people who wear this country's uniform are men and women of skill, and perseverance, and honor. Standing here today, in the great American heartland, I want to thank each and every one of you for the vital work you do, and for your example of service and character. It's a privilege for me to be in your company. You've reflected great credit on your state and on your country. And you've made your fellow citizens extremely proud.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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