



For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
March 6, 2007

President Bush Discusses Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors, War on Terror at American Legion

Renaissance Hotel
Washington, D.C.

 [Fact Sheet: Pursuing a Strategy for Success in Iraq](#)

 [Fact Sheet: Taking Care of America's Returning Wounded](#)

[Warriors](#)

 [In Focus: Veterans](#)

 [Video \(Windows\)](#)

 [Presidential Remarks](#)

 [Audio](#)

10:05 A.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much, Paul, for that warm welcome. I appreciate the fact that you've given me a chance to come and address you. I welcome you to our nation's capital. I offer a special greeting to members of Post 77 from Houston, Texas. (Laughter.) If you're here, my advice is, behave yourself. (Laughter.) What happens in Washington stays in Washington. (Laughter.)

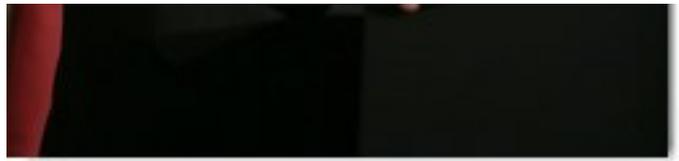
People who know something about the Legion understand firsthand how much this organization does for our men and women in uniform, for those who have been wounded on the field of battle, and for their remarkable families. Our nation has been able to call upon the Legion in times of promise and peril, and our nation is grateful for your service. (Applause.)

I thank -- not only do I thank your Commander, I thank Earl Ruttkofsky. I appreciate Beverly, his wife, and JoAnn Cronin, who happens to be the President of the American Legion Auxiliary. (Applause.) She gets her hair done at the same place my mother does. (Laughter.) Like -- if you're listening, mom, that's a compliment. (Laughter.)

I appreciate so very much Secretary Jim Nicholson, who's in my Cabinet, Department of Veterans Affairs -- Mr. Secretary. I want to thank the members of the Congress who have joined us, starting with Senator Jim



Bunning, Senator Orrin Hatch, and Senator Lindsey Graham. I'm honored you three men are here. Thanks for your time. (Applause.) And I thank you for your articulate defense for the support of our troops.



I appreciate so very much Congressman Jim Saxton from New Jersey, Mike Pence, Indiana, and Joe Wilson from South Carolina. Welcome, and thank you for coming. (Applause.)

Since it's founding in the aftermath of World War I, the American Legion has assumed a sacred obligation: to preserve the traditions of our great democracy and to watch over those charged with its defense. In every war, and in every era, our country's veterans have kept faith with the American people. And it's the obligation of the government to keep faith with our veterans. (Applause.)

Support of our veterans has been a high priority in my administration. This year I've asked Congress for more than \$86 billion for veterans' services. And if Congress approves my request, this would amount to a 77 percent increase of the budget since I took office; it would be the highest level of support for our veterans in American history. (Applause.)

We share with your concern about making sure our vets have good health care. I've talked to your commanders past, and suspect I'll be talking to your commanders future, about making sure that our veterans have got good, decent, quality health care. Since 2001, we've helped over 1 million more veterans -- we've added a million veterans -- take advantage of the VA health care system.

The 2008 budget proposal will increase the VA health care budget by 83 percent since I took office. The Department of Defense's health care budget has grown from \$19 billion to \$38 billion. And that's an important commitment, and I look forward to working with Congress to say to our veterans, we care about you. Money is one thing; delivery of services is another. (Applause.)



I know I share -- listen, I am as concerned as you are about the conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. My decisions have put our kids in harm's way. And I'm concerned about the fact that when they come back they don't get the full treatment they deserve. Many people working at Walter Reed are fine people. If you've been out there, you know what I'm talking about. They're dedicated, honorable healers who care deeply about our soldiers. Fine doctors, nurses and therapists work day and night to help the wounded. Yet some of our troops at Walter Reed have experienced bureaucratic delays and living conditions that are less than they deserve. It's unacceptable to me, it is unacceptable to you, it's unacceptable to our country -- and it's not going to continue. (Applause.)

I recently asked Secretary of Defense Bob Gates to assess the situation at Walter Reed firsthand and

report back to me. He confirmed that there are problems, real problems. He has taken action to address those problems and hold people to account -- including relieving the general in charge of the facility and accepting the resignation of the Secretary of the Army.

As we work to improve conditions at Walter Reed, we are also taking steps to find out whether similar problems exist at other military and veterans hospitals. (Applause.) The best way to do so in a constructive way, in a way that will bring forth the truth, is to create a bipartisan Presidential Commission. I've asked two distinguished public servants to lead the commission, and they have accepted -- Senator Bob Dole and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala. (Applause.)

The Commission will conduct a comprehensive review of the care America is providing our wounded servicemen and women returning from the battlefield. This review will examine their treatment from the time they leave the battlefield through their return to civilian life as veterans -- so we can ensure that we're meeting the physical and mental health needs of all. As this commission begins its work and considers its recommendations, I have also directed the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to lead a task force composed of seven members of my Cabinet to focus and respond to immediate needs.

We have an obligation, we have a moral obligation to provide the best possible care and treatment to the men and women who have served our country. They deserve it, and they're going to get it. (Applause.)

My Administration appreciates your strong support of the flag. The flag is emblazoned on the uniforms of brave men and women who serve our country. It is draped on the coffins of those who fall on the field of battle. It is a symbol of a noble nation and of a higher calling. I join with you and the elected legislatures of all 50 states in urging Congress to provide the flag with the Constitutional protection it deserves. (Applause.)

My administration also shares your determination to keep faith with our prisoners of war and those missing in action. (Applause.) We cannot rest, and must not rest, until we have accounted for every member of our Armed Forces -- from every war and every corner of the globe. (Applause.)

American Legion halls have been mainstays of our communities and neighborhoods for generations. You have taught millions of young people the importance of good citizenship and the values of "God and country." And I appreciate these valuable lessons in America. I saw them firsthand when I was the Governor of Texas. After all, you sponsor Boys State and Girls State. (Applause.) They're great programs. I found it very interesting how the executive director describes the programs. He says, the programs don't -- the programs -- the program, "does not emphasize" -- he has a little trouble with the English. (Laughter and applause.) And so do I. (Laughter.) Describes this as an initiative that, "does not emphasize classroom and textbook learning." That's my kind of program. (Laughter and applause.)

Your example of service offers invaluable lessons for future generations. In times of peace, you counsel vigilance. In times of war, you counsel resolve. More than five years have passed since the attacks of September the 11th, 2001. And we find ourselves debating the causes of this conflict and the course we have followed. Yet even among our differences, there are a few questions that surely

have been settled. One is that September the 11th was not only a crime but an act of war -- (applause) -- a war waged by fanatics who believe it is their duty to kill Americans, and impose their hateful ideology as far as they can spread it.

Since 9/11, they have continued to try to attack us here at home. They're relentless, and they're determined. We stopped an al Qaeda plot to fly a hijacked airplane into the tallest building on the West Coast. We stopped a Southeast Asian terror cell grooming operatives for attacks inside the United States. We stopped an al Qaeda cell developing anthrax to be used in attacks against America. For each life saved, we owe a debt of gratitude to our military, and intelligence, and law enforcement personnel who devote their lives to finding the terrorists and stopping and protect -- stopping them and protecting the American people. (Applause.)

Our most solemn duty is to protect you. The most solemn duty of this government is to protect the American people from further harm. And the best way to do so is to stay on the offense. So we have pursued the enemy aggressively around the world -- degrading their ability to organize and coordinate new attacks here at home. In the wake of 9/11, Americans made a choice: instead of waiting for the enemy to strike on their terms, we would fight the enemy on our terms. (Applause.)

And we fight this war on many fronts. In Afghanistan and Iraq, we removed two of the world's most brutal regimes. And now we are undertaking the complex work of helping the people of these two countries establish functioning democracies that can protect their own people and be allies in this global war on terror. (Applause.) Sometimes we lose sight of the importance of this work in the midst of heated debates -- and this is especially true when it comes to Iraq. The fight in Iraq is more than a conflict in one country, it is part of a larger struggle against extremism that is unfolding across the broader Middle East. The extremists are fighting to take control of Iraq so they can establish it as a base from which to overthrow moderate governments in the region, and plan new attacks on the American people. If we fail in Iraq, the enemy will follow us home. (Applause.) Their success in Iraq would bring danger to America, and that is why America must prevail in Iraq. (Applause.)

I appreciate your strong support for those who have volunteered to wear our uniform. Thousands of courageous men and women have stepped forward to protect us. And they're not alone. Since this war began, nearly 120,000 Iraqis have volunteered to serve in their army. More than 8,000 Iraqis in uniform have died in the defense of their new nation. Recently in Anbar province, where al Qaeda terrorists have gathered, 1,000 Sunnis volunteered for the police force in a period of two weeks. Last month in Hillah, an Iraqi police officer threw himself onto a suicide bomber -- a final, heroic act that saved an untold number of Iraqis gathered outside a local mosque.

Every month, Iraqis risk reprisals from the terrorists and extremists to provide thousands of tips to coalition and Iraqi authorities. One recent tip from an Iraqi led to the discovery of a factory where insurgents developed sophisticated roadside bombs to kill our troops. With these acts of bravery, the Iraqis are standing up for the democratic future that 12 million of them voted for. (Applause.) The vast majority of Iraq's citizens want to live in peace, and they're showing their courage every day. And the United States of America will not abandon them in their hour of need. (Applause.)

To reach our goals, and to prevail, we must recognize that the nature of the war in Iraq has changed.

In 2005, the terrorists tried and failed to stop the Iraqi people as they held three national elections. They choose a transitional government, they adopted the most progressive, democratic constitution in the Arab world, and then they elected a government under that constitution. So a thinking enemy adjusted their tactics, and in 2006 they struck.

Last February, al Qaeda and other Sunni extremists blew up the Golden Mosque of Samarra. This atrocity was designed to provoke retaliation from the Iraqi Shia -- and it succeeded. Radical Shia elements, some of whom receive support from Iran, formed death squads. And the result was a tragic escalation of sectarian rage and reprisal.

This changed the nature of the conflict in Iraq. We still faced the threat from al Qaeda, but the sectarian violence was getting out of hand, and threatened to destroy this young democracy before it had a chance to succeed. So last fall, I ordered my national security team to conduct a comprehensive review of our strategy in Iraq. We devised an approach that is markedly different from previous efforts. This approach demands more from Iraq's elected government, makes bringing security to Baghdad our top priority, and gives our troops the reinforcements they need to carry out their missions. And to carry out this strategy, I put in place a highly-regarded commander, an expert on counterinsurgency -- General David Petraeus.

General Petraeus' mission is to help Iraq's leaders implement the plan that they developed to secure Baghdad. Today they can't do this on their own. So I have ordered reinforcements of more than 20,000 additional combat soldiers and Marines to Iraq. The majority will go to Baghdad, where they will help Iraqi forces to clear and secure neighborhoods, and where they will partner with Iraqi units. The Iraqis in the lead, our forces will help secure the city by chasing down the terrorists, insurgents, and murderers, and roaming death squads.

We're fixing one of the major problems with our previous approach in Baghdad. In the past, our forces would help Iraqis clear out neighborhoods during the day, and then go back to their bases at night, and often the enemy returned as soon as American forces left. This time, we will hold the neighborhoods we have cleared by establishing over 30 "joint security stations" throughout Baghdad. These will be neighborhood outposts where Iraqi forces, with U.S. help, will be deployed 24 hours a day to secure the population, provide emergency aid to the communities, and gather information to root out extremist networks throughout the capital. At the same time, our forces will continue to train Iraqi Army and Police, so that we can help ensure that the Iraqi forces left behind are capable of providing security that Baghdad needs.

It's too early to judge the success of this operation. General Petraeus recently arrived in the Iraqi capital, and the plan he is executing is in its early stages. This strategy is going to take time. And we can expect al Qaeda and other extremists to try to derail the strategy by launching spectacular attacks.

Yet even at this early hour, there are some encouraging signs: The Iraqi government has completed the deployment of three additional Iraqi Army brigades to the capital. They said they were going to employ three brigades, and they did. Iraq's leaders have lifted restrictions on Iraqi and coalition forces that prevented them from going into certain areas. Already, about half of the joint security stations have been established in neighborhoods across Baghdad. Iraqi and U.S. forces have rounded up more than

700 people affiliated with Shia extremists. They have recovered large weapons caches, including mortar weapons systems and rocket-propelled grenades.

Iraqi and American forces have also launched successful operations against the Sunni extremists. U.S. and Iraqi forces recently killed al Qaeda terrorists in Baghdad, who were responsible for some of those bomb attacks that you're seeing on your TV screens. In the past two weeks, U.S. and Iraqi forces have also uncovered large stockpiles of Explosively Formed Projectiles -- or EFPs -- which are used by extremist groups to attack our troops. Iraqi and U.S. forces are making gradual but important progress almost every day, and we will remain steadfast until our objectives are achieved. (Applause.)

In addition to the steps they are taking to secure their capital, Iraq's leaders are also taking steps to achieve political reconciliation -- reconciliation that is necessary after years of brutal tyranny. They have committed themselves to a series of benchmarks to advance this reconciliation -- to share oil revenues amongst all Iraq's citizens, to put the wealth of Iraq into rebuilding of Iraq, to allow more Iraqis to re-enter their nation's civic life, to hold local elections, and to take responsibility for security in every Iraqi province.

Iraqis have already begun to deliver on some of these promises. For example, Iraq's Council of Ministers recently agreed on legislation they will submit to their parliament on the development of Iraq's oil resources and the sharing of revenues. Last month, the Iraqi government approved a budget that includes \$10 billion for reconstruction and capital investment. These are encouraging signs. And now Iraq's leaders must meet the other pledges they have made.

To succeed, Iraq's leaders also need the help of the international community. So the United States supports the Iraqi government as it pursues an international initiative to build diplomatic, economic, and security support for its young democracy. Last week, the Iraqis announced that they will hold a conference in Baghdad that will include officials from Iraq's neighboring countries, as well as the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, the Arab League, and the Organization of Islamic Conference.

It will be followed next month by a second conference that includes Secretary Rice and her counterparts from around the world. These meetings will be an important test. They'll be a test of whether Iran and Syria are truly interested in being constructive forces in Iraq. It will be a test for the international community to express its support for this young democracy, to support a nation that will be at peace with its neighbors.

Diplomacy is going to play an important part of securing Iraq's future. Yet diplomacy will fail without a robust military strategy. The goal of the enemies in Iraq is power, and they're willing to kill themselves and innocent men, women, and children to achieve that goal. People like these can't be satisfied by negotiations or diplomatic concessions. Our strategy recognizes the hard truth. So we're going to continue to pursue our enemies in Iraq relentlessly, and at the same time, we'll work with moderate forces to achieve reconciliation between sectarian factions.

Here in Washington, we have important decisions on Iraq ahead of us. And the most pivotal question is whether the United States Congress will stand behind General Petraeus and our troops as they work

to secure Baghdad. General Petraeus has my confidence, and he also has the confidence of the United States Senate. In fact, he was recently confirmed to his post without one single vote against him. Yet almost immediately the House passed a resolution that disapproved of his strategy for success in Iraq. I know you find that puzzling -- (laughter) -- you're not the only one. (Laughter.) This may be the first time in the history of the United States Congress that voted to send a new commander into battle and then voted to oppose the plan he said was critical in winning that battle.

Members of Congress have every right to express their opinion. They have every right. They also have a responsibility to fund our war fighters. (Applause.) Some in Congress have called for cutting off funds for our troops, only to find opposition from their colleagues on Capitol Hill. Now others in Congress are planning to use an emergency war spending bill that will provide funds for the war on terror as an opportunity to add on billions of dollars for unrelated domestic programs. Tacking extra domestic spending to an emergency war spending bill only will complicate Congress' ability to provide the support that our troops urgently need. I ask the Congress to approve the funds we requested and our troops are counting on without strings and without delay. (Applause.)

Equally important to funding our troops is giving our commanders the flexibility to carry out their missions, without undue interference from politicians in Washington. (Applause.) Some members of Congress say that we can succeed in Iraq without providing the reinforcements that our forces have been promised and are expecting. I disagree. More importantly, our commanders disagree. Other members of Congress seem to believe that we can have it all: that we can fight al Qaeda, pursue national reconciliation, initiate aggressive diplomacy, and deter Iran's ambitions in Iraq -- all while withdrawing from Baghdad and reducing our force levels. That sounds good in theory, but doing so at this moment would undermine everything our troops have worked for. (Applause.)

There are no short cuts in Iraq. Our intelligence and military experts agree that given the current situation, Iraq will not be a stable nation until its capital is more secure. Political reconciliation is difficult when a country's seat of government is under constant siege. Economic improvements cannot take root when Baghdad's neighborhoods are the scene of daily sectarian violence and reprisals. And you cannot effectively battle al Qaeda by ignoring the sectarian violence they are inciting, especially in the capital.

If American forces were to step back from Baghdad now, before it is more secure, the scale and scope of attacks would increase and the intensity would increase. A contagion of violence could spill out across the entire country, and in time, the entire region. The enemy would emerge from the chaos emboldened, with new safe havens and new recruits and new resources and an even greater determination to harm America.

For our country, this is a nightmare scenario. For the enemy, it's their plan. They're not debating whether the war in Iraq is worth it. Hear the words of bin Laden, in a message to the American people just last year. He says of Iraq: "The war is for you or for us to win. If we win it, it means your defeat and disgrace forever." In the face of such a determined enemy, the idea of pulling back from the fight and hoping for the best is not a reasonable position. America did not drive al Qaeda out of their safe haven in Afghanistan only to let them set up a shop in a free Iraq. (Applause.)

Now that the battle for Baghdad is underway, our country is best served by standing behind our troops and doing everything we can to aid in their success. The outcome of this conflict involves more than the fortunes of any one President or any political party. Our mission is America's mission, and our failure would be America's failure.

Our country is fortunate that our mission is in the hands of America's finest citizens -- the men and women who wear our uniform. (Applause.) They've been on the battlefield. They have seen this war up close. They know the consequences of failure. And they appreciate something larger: the consequences of success. (Applause.) We know what a free Iraq could mean for the region and the world, because we know how your sacrifices half a century ago helped create a free Germany that transformed Europe, and a free Japan that sparked a wave of democracy and prosperity throughout much of Asia. We know that a free Iraq has the potential to spark a similar transformation in the Middle East, and bring us closer to the day when moms and dads in the Arab world see a future of hope for their children. And we know that the sacrifices that our troops are making in Iraq today will lay the foundation of peace for generations of Americans to come.

Last year, I received a letter from a Navy Seabee named Andy Clements. He was serving in Iraq. He says he worked alongside Iraqis on a daily basis, and that they appreciate what America is doing for their country. And he told me this story, "I was at Baghdad International Airport several weeks ago and had a small Iraqi boy, near the same age as my own son, run up to me and salute. He kept repeating 'thank you' in broken English, and wanted to shake my hand. I will remember that chance meeting forever. And that to me is what being [done] here is all about."

In the brief history of our nation, we've seen freedom remake the world many times, and yet we always seem surprised by the quiet power of our ideals. It's in our power to show those who hunger for liberty the path away from tyranny and terror. Throughout our history, we have gone through tough moments and we have come out stronger on the other side. We've been guided by our belief that freedom is not an American privilege, but a value that belongs to all mankind. (Applause.)

The struggle in Iraq may be hard, but this should not be a time for despair. We can have confidence in the final outcome of this struggle, because we have men on our side like Timothy Tardif. The 25-year-old Marine was in an Iraqi town when his squad came under heavy fire. He was engaged in combat so intense that Marine Corps Commandant, General Mike Hagee, described it as a "hand grenade throwing contest." In that combat, Sergeant Tardif was seriously wounded by grenade fragments. Yet he refused medical attention until the battle had been won. Later, when he was evacuated, he called his wife from the transit hospital in Germany and he said this, "Honey, I could come home right now, but I feel I have responsibilities, and I'm going back to Iraq." He borrowed a uniform, he convinced his doctor to let him out of the hospital, and the man returned to his squad.

A lot of you can tell stories like this. Each of you knows a fellow patriot whose name is carried in your heart or who sits proudly beside you in this hall today. I want to thank you for the sacrifices you have made. I thank you for example you have set. And I thank you for the steadfast support of the men and women who wear our uniform.

You know that America can overcome any challenge or any difficulty. You know America's brightest

days are still ahead. And you know that nothing we say here -- no speech, or vote, or resolution in the United States Congress -- means more to the future of our country than the men and women who wake up every morning and put on the uniform of our country and defend the United States of America. (Applause.)

I thank you for your time. God bless. (Applause.)

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