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President Bush Participates in Briefings at U.S. Department of Defense

The Pentagon

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12:06 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Good morning. I've just completed a meeting with Secretary Gates and General Pace and the members of the Joint Chiefs. I appreciate your hospitality. I really enjoy coming to the Defense Department to sit at the same table with these distinguished Americans. These folks are good, strategic thinkers. They're smart, they're capable, and we're lucky they wear the uniform.

I spent time discussing with them the needs of our military personnel as they carry out vital missions. The Joint Chiefs shared with me the latest developments and updated me on the troop rotations as they implement our new Baghdad security plan. They report that the three additional Iraqi brigades promised by the government are in place and are conducting operations in the Baghdad area. Three additional American brigades totally about 12,000 troops have taken up positions and are also conducting operations.



The Chiefs told me that the fourth American brigade of reinforcements has just entered Baghdad and its surrounding towns, and that the commanders expect the fifth American brigade to be in place by the middle of June. So it's going to be another month before all the additional troops that General Petraeus has requested are on the ground and carrying out their missions in Iraq.

American reinforcements in Baghdad, along with the Iraqi security forces, are now living and working with the Iraqi people in neighborhood posts called joint security stations. These stations are a place from which American and Iraqi forces act against terrorists and insurgents and death squads. And they patrol streets to build trust and increase local cooperation. In other words, there's active engagement by Iraqi forces and coalition forces in neighborhoods throughout Baghdad and the area.

And what happens with increased presence, there's increased confidence, and with increased confidence becomes increased information, information that forces can use to go after extremists, to bring down sectarian violence that plague the capital city of that country. The level of sectarian

violence is an important indicator of whether or not the strategy that we have implemented is working. Since our operation began, the number of sectarian murders has dropped substantially.

As we have surged our forces, al Qaeda is responding with their own surge. Al Qaeda is ratcheting up its campaign of high-profile attacks, including deadly suicide bombings carried out by foreign terrorists. America responded, along with coalition forces, to help this young democracy, and a brutal enemy has responded, as well. These attacks are part of a calculated campaign to reignite sectarian violence in Baghdad, and to convince the people here in America that the effort can't succeed. We're also seeing high levels of violence because our forces are entering areas where terrorists and militia once has sanctuary. As they continue to do so, our commanders have made clear that our troops will face more fighting and increased risks in the weeks and months ahead.

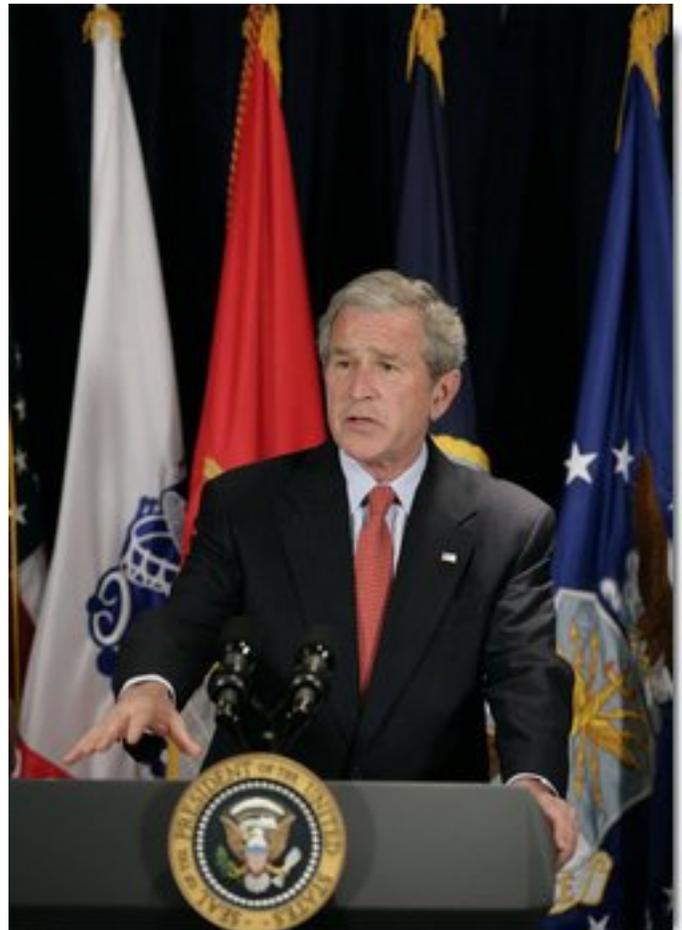
As we help Iraqis bring security to their own country, we're also working with Iraqi leaders to secure greater international support for their young democracy. And last week, Secretary Rice attended an international meeting on Iraq and Egypt, and she briefed me and she briefed Secretary Gates -- there he is right there.

The meeting included representatives from Iraq's neighbors, as well as Egypt and Bahrain, and G8 countries, and the Arab League, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. It was a robust international meeting where Iraqi leaders expressed their determination to meet a series of benchmarks they have set for political progress. In other words, they have not only told me that they're going to meet benchmarks, they've not only told Secretary Gates that they intend to meet benchmarks, but they've also told the international community they intend to do so.

These benchmarks include adoption of a national oil law and preparations for provincial elections and progress on a new de-Baathification policy and a review of the Iraqi constitution.

The nations assembled in Egypt pledged to support Iraq in these efforts. In other words, the Iraqis said, we need help, and these nations pledged support. It's a very positive development. They're going to help Iraq secure its borders. They've said they will help stem the flow of terrorists into their country. They agreed to support the international compact established by Iraq and the United Nations so that Iraq can reform and rebuild its economy.

For Iraqi leaders to succeed in all these efforts their people must have security. That's why I made the decision I made. That's why we sent additional troops into Baghdad. But we need to give General



Petraeus's plan time to work. There's a debate waging in Washington here about how long we're going to be there -- we haven't even got all our troops there. I still find it interesting that General Petraeus was given a unanimous confirmation vote by the United States Senate after he made clear his plan, and before the plan has been fully implemented some in Washington are saying, you need to leave. My attitude is, General Petraeus's plan ought to be given a chance to work, and we need to give the troops under his command the resources they need to prevail.

I met with congressional leaders to discuss the way forward last week. I fully understand Republicans and Democrats have disagreements. We should be able to agree that the consequences of failure in Iraq would be disastrous for our country. And they would be disastrous for our country. We should be able to agree that we have a responsibility to provide our men and women on the front lines with the resources and flexibility they need to do the job we've asked them to do.

I believe that leaders of goodwill can deliver to our troops, and we've got to deliver it soon. Time is running out, because the longer we wait, the more strain we're going to put on the military. All Americans know the goodness and character of the U.S. Armed Forces. They are risking their lives each day to fight our enemies and to keep our people safe. Their families are making tremendous sacrifices on behalf of our country. It's important for the people who wear the uniform and their families to know that as the Commander-in-Chief, I'm proud of the sacrifices they have made, and the American people honor their service to our country.



And now I'll be glad to answer a couple of questions. Jennifer, why don't you kick it off.

Q Thank you, sir. With some Republicans saying they need to see measurable progress by September, are you willing to reevaluate troop levels then, based on what General Petraeus says? And, also, are you willing to accept any consequences for benchmarks in the war funding bill?

THE PRESIDENT: You know, I meet with a lot of people on the subject of Iraq. And I should; there's a lot of opinions on both sides of the aisle about this issue. My message to the members of Congress is, whatever your beliefs may be, let's make sure our troops get funded, and let's make sure politicians don't tell our commanders how to conduct operations; let's don't hamstring our people in the field. That's my message.

Their message to me has been, you know, don't you think the Iraqi government ought to do more? They recognize what I recognize, and these gentlemen up here particularly recognize, that without political progress it's going to be hard to achieve a military victory in Iraq. In other words, the military can provide security so a political process can go forward.

The two questions you asked, one was about General



Petraeus's report to -- around September about what's taking place in Baghdad. My attitude toward Congress is, why don't you wait and see what he says? Fund the troops, and let him come back and report to the American people. General Petraeus picked this date; he believes that there will be enough progress one way or the other to be able to report to the American people, to give an objective assessment about what he sees regarding the Baghdad security plan.



It's at that point in time that I'm confident that the Secretary and the Joint Chiefs will take a look at what David Petraeus says and make recommendations about troop levels, based upon the conditions on the ground, which stands in stark contrast to members of Congress who say, we're going to determine troop levels based upon politics, or the latest opinion poll, or how we can get our members elected.

And the second part of your question was about benchmarks. Look, let me talk about this recent effort by Congress to fund our troops. The idea that the House of Representatives put forward is one that we will fund our troops by piecemeal. Secretary Gates was very strong about why that's a bad idea. And the American people must understand that if you fund our troops every two months, you're in a -- put in a position where we have to delay certain procurement, or that military contracts must be delayed -- there's a lot of uncertainty in funding when it comes to two-month cycles. So we reject that idea. It won't work.

I find it odd that the Congress is -- I find it ironic that the Congress is ready to fully fund unrelated domestic spending items, and only one-half of the money requested for our troops. They provide 100 percent of the money for the special interest projects that don't have anything to do with fighting the war on terror, and 50 percent of the money to go to those who wear our uniform. They got it wrong. They ought to provide 100 percent of the money for people who wear the uniform, and leave these special pork projects out of the bill. And so I'll veto the bill if it's this haphazard piecemeal funding. And I made that clear.

One message I have heard from people from both parties is that the idea of benchmarks makes sense. And I agree. It makes sense to have benchmarks as a part of our discussion on how to go forward. And so I've empowered Josh Bolten to find common ground on benchmarks, and he will continue to have dialogue with both Republicans and Democrats.

You know, this bill -- I believe we can get a good supplemental and I hope it's as quick as possible. The first blush is a bad supplemental coming out of the House. Nevertheless, there is -- the Senate will have a say and then there will be a conference committee, and hopefully we can move a good bill forward as quickly as possible. These gentlemen will tell you that the longer we wait, the more it hurts our military and the families.

Toby.

Q Mr. President, with Prime Minister Tony Blair stepping down, are you concerned that British policy on Iraq could change significantly?

THE PRESIDENT: First of all, I'll miss Tony Blair. He is a political figure who is capable of thinking over the horizon. He's a long-term thinker. I have found him to be a man who's kept his word -- which sometimes is rare in the political circles I run in. When Tony Blair tells you something, as we say in Texas, you can take it to the bank. We've got a relationship such that we can have really good discussions. So I'm going to miss him. He's a remarkable person and I consider him a good friend.

I obviously look forward to meeting with his successor. I believe that the relationship between Great Britain and America is a vital relationship. It is a relationship that has stood the test of time, and when America and Great Britain work together, we can accomplish important objectives. We share common values. We share a great history. And so I look forward to working with Gordon Brown, who I presume is going to be the -- maybe I shouldn't say -- I shouldn't predict who is going to be in, but the punditry suggests it will be him.

I have had a meeting with him and found him to be an open and engaging person. It's amazing how people make all kinds of characterizations about people in the political process, and I found him to be a easy-to-talk-to, good thinker.

Q What do you think he'll do on Iraq? Do you --

THE PRESIDENT: I think -- look, I believe he understands the consequences of failure. The interesting thing about the Iraq debate, by the way, is I don't hear a lot of discussions about what happens if we fail. I hear a lot of discussions about maybe we can make good political progress based upon this issue, or let's just make sure that we constantly achieve -- make political hay based upon Iraq. I hear a lot of that. But there needs to be a serious discussion about what happens if we create a vacuum into which radical movements flow.

If you're worried about Iran, then it's really important that people understand the consequences of us leaving before the job is done. I am deeply concerned about what would happen in the Middle East should America's credibility be diminished as a result of us not keeping our word, as a result of us abandoning millions of people who are anxious to live in a stable, secure, free society. I worry about the signal it would send to al Qaeda. As I told you earlier, and as David Petraeus said -- let me put it in his words -- al Qaeda is public enemy number one in Iraq. Al Qaeda also should be viewed as public enemy number one in America.

And why do I say that? Well, al Qaeda attacked us once and killed thousands of citizens on our soil. I believe they want to attack us again. I believe failure in Iraq would only embolden al Qaeda further. I know that vacuums in the Middle East are likely to be filled by radicals and extremists, who, at the very minimum, would share a common enemy, the United States, and some of our strongest allies.

And so it's vital we succeed. The debate in Washington is, how fast can we withdraw, amongst some. The debate ought to be, what do we need to do to make sure that we not only don't fail, but succeed.

And so I believe Gordon Brown understands the consequence of failure. But I'm looking forward to working with him. I'm looking forward to working with the new President of France. I'm looking forward to working with a lot of people in Europe to not only achieve success in Iraq, but also achieve success in Afghanistan, another theater in the war on terror.

Let's see here -- Roger. Yes, Rog. I call him, "Rog."

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Good afternoon. You just mentioned the new leader of France, and I was going to ask you about him. Have you talked to him? Are you recruiting him as a part of the coalition? Any messages for him? And you sent Mr. Cheney to the Mideast to visit with the other neighbors. What specifically are the requests you are making of them?

THE PRESIDENT: Sure. First of all, Presidents don't recruit; the people elect a leader with whom I will work. And I had a -- I did talk to President-elect Sarkozy. I think it was at about 8:03 p.m. Paris time. He won at 8:00 p.m., and I called him shortly thereafter. And I'm so grateful he took my phone call. I had met with him before when he came over here, and found him to be a very engaging, energetic, smart, capable person. We will have our differences, and we will have our agreements. And I'm looking forward to working with him.

Vice President Cheney is in the Middle East. His first message to the Iraqis was that they have got to speed up their clock, that -- I agree with General Petraeus's assessment that there are two clocks, one ticking here in Washington, and one ticking there. And they must understand that we are very serious when it comes to them passing law that enables his country to more likely reconcile. And then he'll be traveling to talk to other friends in the area.

One of the questions that many ask is, do we understand the Iranian issue well? Do we understand the consequences of Iran having a nuclear weapon, which it looks like they want to try achieve -- to get. And the answer is, absolutely. And they'll find a stalwart friend in dealing with extremism in that vital part of the world. And the Vice President will lay out our strategy of convincing others to join us on this Iranian issue. He will point out to them that we have worked hard to convince not only the EU3 to join with the United States in sending a clear message, but also now Russia and China, and that we do have a diplomatic front. And we've got to continue to work together. We've got to work to keep it together, to send a focused, concerted message.

He will also remind people that success in Iraq will be important for dealing with Iran; that if we were to listen to some of the voices in Congress and withdraw before the job was done, it would embolden Iran. In other words, there are strategic consequences to what is being said here in Washington, D.C. about the Iraqi issue.

And so he's got to -- it's a vital trip, and I really appreciate him going. And it looked like he had a good stop yesterday. I haven't talked to him, but it looks like he's -- it looks like he had a good day yesterday and I'm looking forward -- he'll check in.

Mark.

Q Mr. President, in your meeting with some moderate Republicans this week, in particular Representative LaHood, who, afterwards, said, "The way forward after September, if the report is not good, is going to be difficult" --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q -- those are his words -- are you perhaps facing an ultimatum on the war this fall with Congress?

THE PRESIDENT: You know, first of all, I appreciate the members coming down to the White House. We had a good exchange. It gave me a chance to share with them my feelings about the Iraqi issue. I spent time talking to them about what it meant to fail, and what it means when we succeed. They expressed their opinions. They're obviously concerned about the Iraq war. But so are a lot of other people.

I remind people -- I reminded them that last fall, late fall -- I had been one of these people that get endlessly polled -- you know, these surveys and the pollsters calling people all the time, it looks like -- and if they had asked my opinion, I'd have said, I disapprove of what was going on in Iraq. You could have put me down as part of the disapproval process -- and, therefore, had put a plan in place that would more likely cause me to approve of what's going on in Iraq. That's why I made the decision I made.

I explained to them why I made the decision I made. And I said, look, David Petraeus has got a plan, and members of Congress -- some members of Congress won't let him implement the plan. That doesn't make any sense, on the one hand, for us to send him out with the unanimous confirmation by the Senate, and then to deny him the troops and/or the funds necessary to get the job done. And I reminded them that we ought to give David Petraeus a chance.

I did explain to them that General Petraeus has said he's going to come back and report to the Secretary and the Joint Chiefs and the White House and the Congress about whether or not the strategy that he thinks could work, is working. And at that point in time, we will respond accordingly.

As I told people, that decisions about the posture in Iraq needs to be based upon conditions on the ground. And no better person to report about the conditions on the ground than somebody who was there, and that would be General Petraeus. And at that point in time, upon the recommendation of the Secretary and the Joint Chiefs and General Petraeus, we will respond to what he says. So I said, why don't we wait and see what happens? Let's give this plan a chance to work. Let's stop playing politics. It's one thing to have a good, honest debate about the way forward in Iraq; it's another thing to put our troops right in the middle of that debate.

These troops deserve the money necessary to do the job. And our commanders need the flexibility necessary to do the job. And I believe this cause is necessary and it's noble. That's why I put those young men and women out there in the first place. It's necessary for the peace and security of our country. It's noble to have such amazing citizens volunteer to go into harm's way. And our Congress needs to support him. It's one thing to have a political debate or a debate about strategies; it's another thing to make sure that money gets sent to them on a timely basis. I repeat: This idea of funding our

troops every two months is not -- is not adequate, and I, frankly, don't think it's right. They need to give these troops what they -- what the military has asked for them.

We can debate Iraq -- and should. There should be no debate about making sure that money gets there on a timely basis so our kids can do the job we've asked them to do.

I want to thank you all for your time.

END 12:30 P.M. EDT

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