THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESIDENT
GEORGE W. BUSH

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President Bush Visits Naval War College, Discusses Iraq, War on Terror

Spruance Auditorium
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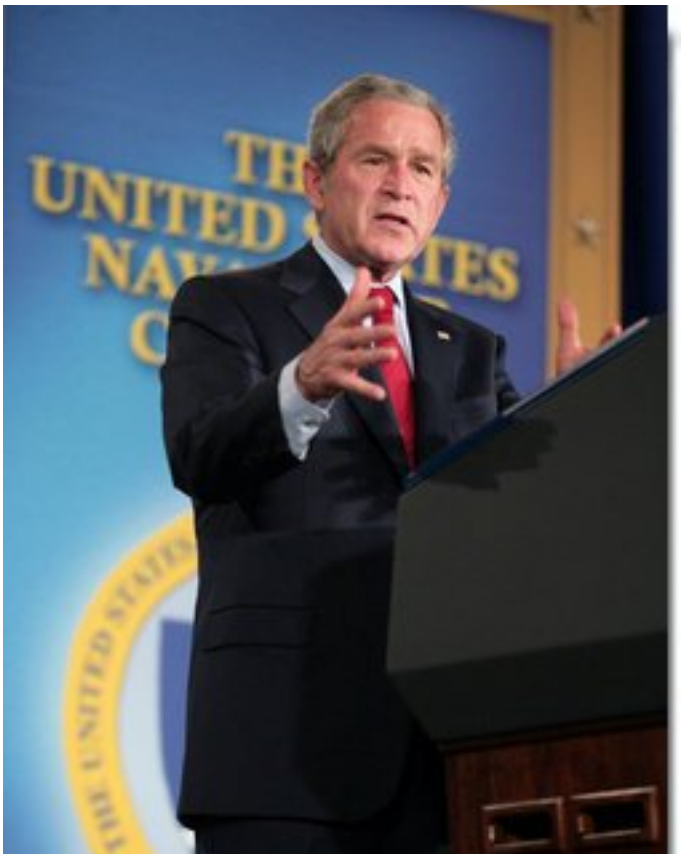
11:22 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, all. Please be seated. Thanks for the warm welcome. Thanks, Governor; appreciate you -- go find a nice seat. (Laughter.) I am really pleased to be among the best and brightest of the United States military. (Applause.) And I am pleased to see the many here who represent nations from around the world. Thanks for coming by. (Laughter.) Those who go to school here are at a great place. We actually have some things in common. We went to school in New England. (Laughter.) We pursued advanced degrees. And we compiled outstanding academic records. (Laughter.) Well, two out of three. (Laughter and applause.)



The Naval War College is where the United States military does some of its finest thinking. You help the Navy define its mission. You support its combat readiness. You strengthen our maritime security cooperation with other countries. You train officers to think strategically. And that's important. The United States Navy is the most professional and advanced navy the world has ever seen -- and the men and women of the Naval War College are determined to keep it that way, and I appreciate your work.

More than a century ago, the president of this college wrote a book called "The Influence of Sea Power upon History." The book was read by Theodore Roosevelt. It affected American strategic thinking for decades to come. Now we're in a new and unprecedented war against violent Islamic extremists. This is an ideological conflict we face against murderers and killers who try to impose their will. These are the people that attacked us

on September the 11th and killed nearly 3,000 people. The stakes are high, and once again, we have had to change our strategic thinking.

The major battleground in this war is Iraq. And this morning I'm going to give you an update on the strategy we're pursuing in Iraq. I'll outline some of the indicators that will tell us if we're succeeding. And I appreciate you giving me a chance to come and visit with you.

I appreciate the Governor of this great state and his wife, Sue. I'm proud to call you friend, and thank you very much for your thoughtfulness today. The Governor gave me a helicopter tour of this beautiful part of the world. The tall ships were magnificent.

Rear Admiral Shuford and his wife, Cathy, thanks as well for being in the military; thanks for leading and thanks for inviting me here. I appreciate Rear Admiral Tom Eccles, Commander, Naval Undersea Warfare Center. I thank my friends, Governors who have joined us: Governor Jodi Rell, Governor Mark Sanford, Governor Matt Blunt. One day we'll all be members of the ex-Governors Club. (Laughter.) Later, rather than sooner, in your case. (Laughter.) I appreciate all the other state and local officials, the students here, the faculty here, and alumni here. Thanks for coming.

Earlier this year, I laid out a new strategy for Iraq. I wasn't pleased with what was taking place on the ground. I didn't approve of what I was seeing. And so I called together our military and said, can we design a different strategy to succeed? And I accepted their recommendations. And this new strategy is different from the one were pursuing before. It is being led by a new commander, General David Petraeus -- and a new ambassador, Ryan Crocker. It recognizes that our top priority must be to help the Iraqi government and its security forces protect their population from attack -- especially in Baghdad, the capital. It's a new mission. And David Petraeus is in Iraq carrying it out. Its goal is to help the Iraqis make progress toward reconciliation -- to build a free nation that respects the rights of its people, upholds the rule of law, and is an ally against the extremists in this war.

And it's in our interests, it's in our national interests to help them succeed. America has sent reinforcements to help the Iraqis secure their population. In other words, one of the decisions I had to make was, what should our troop levels be? I asked the military what they thought the troop levels ought to be. That's what you expect from your Commander-in-Chief, to consult closely with the United States military in times of war. They made recommendations, and I sent the reinforcements in to help the Iraqis secure their population, to go after terrorists, insurgents, and militias that incite sectarian violence and to help get this capital of Iraq under control.

The last of the reinforcements arrived in Iraq earlier this month -- and the full surge has begun. One of our top commanders, Ray Odierno, puts it this way: "We are beyond a surge of forces, and we're now into a surge of operations." Today I am going to give you an update on how these operations are proceeding. I'll talk about the progress and challenges regarding reconciliation at both the national and local levels. I'm going to outline some of the criteria we will be using to tell us if we are succeeding.

Let me begin with Anbar province. You can see here on the map, Anbar is a largely Sunni province that accounts for nearly a third of Iraqi territory. It's a big place. Anbar stretches from the outskirts of

Baghdad to Iraq's borders with Jordan and Syria. It was al Qaeda's chief base of operations in Iraq. Remember, when I mention al Qaeda, they're the ones who attacked the United States of America and killed nearly 3,000 people on September the 11th, 2001. They're part of the enemy. They're extremists and radicals who try to impose their view on the world.

According to a captured document -- in other words, according to something that we captured from al Qaeda -- they had hoped to set up its -- a government in Anbar. And that would have brought them closer to their stated objective of taking down Iraq's democracy, building a radical Islamic empire, and having a safe haven from which to launch attacks on Americans at home and abroad. This is what the enemy said. And I think it is vital that the United States of America listen closely to what the enemy says.

Last September, Anbar was all over the news. It was held up as an example of America's failure in Iraq. The papers cited a leaked intelligence report that was pessimistic about our prospects there. One columnist summed it up this way: "The war is over in Anbar province, and the United States lost."

About the same time some folks were writing off Anbar, our troops were methodically clearing Anbar's capital city of Ramadi of terrorists, and winning the trust of the local population. In parallel with these efforts, a group of tribal sheiks launched a movement called "The Awakening" -- and began cooperating with American and Iraqi forces. These sheiks, these leaders were tired of murder and tired of mayhem that al Qaeda had brought to their towns and communities. They knew exactly who these folks were.

To capitalize on this opportunity, I sent more Marines into Anbar. And gradually they have been helping the locals take back their province from al Qaeda.

These operations are showing good results. Our forces are going into parts of Anbar where they couldn't operate before. With the help of Iraqi and coalition forces, local Sunni tribes have driven al Qaeda from most of Ramadi -- and attacks there are now down to a two-year low. Recruiting of Iraqi police forces now draws thousands of candidates, compared to a few hundred just a few months ago. This month, Anbar opened its first police academy. And as the slide shows, overall attacks in Anbar are sharply down from this time last year.

Despite successes, Anbar province remains a dangerous place. Why? Because al Qaeda wants their base of operations back, and it is working to assassinate sheiks and intimidate the local population. We've got to prepare ourselves for more violence and more setbacks. But a province that had been written off as hopeless now enjoys a level of peace and stability that was unimaginable only a few months ago.

We are hoping to replicate the success we have had in Anbar in other parts of Iraq -- especially in areas in and around Baghdad. In the months since I announced our new strategy, we have been moving reinforcements into key Baghdad neighborhoods and the areas around the capital to help secure the population. I told you what the mission was, and that's what we're doing. Now we have launched a wider offensive, called Operation Phantom Thunder, which is taking the fight to the enemy in the capital as well as its surrounding regions. This operation focuses on defeating al Qaeda

terrorists, the insurgents, and militias, denying the extremists safe havens, and breaking up their logistics, supply, and communications.

This map shows Baghdad and its surrounding areas. In January, I explained that 80 percent of Iraq's sectarian violence occurs within 30 miles of the capital. Although some of the violence that plagues Baghdad is home-grown, a good part of it originates from terrorists operating in the surrounding areas. If we can clear these strongholds of al Qaeda and death squads, we can improve life for the citizens of the areas -- and inhibit the enemy's ability to strike within the capital. And this is what Phantom Thunder is designed to do.

I am going to describe some of the operations that are unfolding in different areas around the capital:

To the north of Baghdad, our forces have surged into Diyala province. The primary focus is the provincial capital of Baqubah, which is just an hour's car ride from Baghdad. There, masked gunmen enforce their brutal rule with prisons and torture chambers and punish crimes like smoking.

In one building, our forces discovered a medical facility for the terrorists that tells us the enemy was preparing itself for a sustained and deadly fight. They had burrowed in. There was no resistance. They were trying to export their violence to the capital. Iraqi and American troops are now fighting block by block. The colonel leading the assault says we have denied al Qaeda a major bastion. The city is cleared. The challenge, of course, is going to be for coalition and Iraqi forces to keep it that way. But we're making progress in Operation Phantom Thunder.

To the southeast of Baghdad, we are going after al Qaeda in safe havens they established along the Tigris River. These safe havens include areas like Salman Pak and Arab Jabour -- areas well known for sending car and truck bombs into Baghdad. Extremists in many of these areas are being confronted by U.S. and Iraqi forces for the first time in three years. We can expect determined resistance. They don't like to be confronted. But General Petraeus says, in order to accomplish the mission, we're going to confront them with the finest military ever assembled on the face of the Earth. That's the U.S. military. Our forces are determined, and we're going to take those safe havens away from al Qaeda and the extremists.

To the west and northwest of Baghdad, Operation Phantom Thunder is going after al Qaeda's remaining outposts in Anbar. We're taking the fight to areas around Karmah -- it's a known transit point for al Qaeda fighters. One example of what we are now seeing, U.S. and Iraqi forces in Fallujah seized 25,000 gallons of nitric acid -- a critical ingredient for car bombs and truck bombs. The deputy commander of U.S. forces west of Baghdad says we have largely succeeded in driving the terrorists out of Anbar's population centers. He says, "The surge has given us the troops we needed to really clear up those areas, so we cleared them and we stayed."

Within Baghdad itself, the surge in forces has allowed us to establish a presence in areas where the terrorists and insurgents had embedded themselves among the people. In the past two weeks alone, our troops in Baghdad have captured five militia cells. And some of the names you will be hearing in the next few months will include places like Adamiyah, Rashid, and Mansour. These areas are important, because they represent so-called sectarian fault lines -- locations where Shia extremists and

al Qaeda terrorists are attempting to reignite sectarian violence through murder, and kidnappings, and other violent activities. Until these areas and others like them are secured, the people of Baghdad can't be protected; they can't go about their lives.

Right now, we're at the beginning stage of the offensive. We finally got the troops there. Americans have got to understand it takes a while to mobilize additional troops and move them from the United States to Iraq. And we got them there. And now we're beginning to move. And there are hopeful signs. Last week our commanders reported the killing of two senior al Qaeda leaders north of Baghdad -- one who operated a cell that helped move foreign fighters into Iraq, and another who served as a courier for the same cell.

Within Baghdad, our military reports that despite an upward trend in May, sectarian murders in the capital are now down substantially from what they were in January. We are finding arms caches at more than three times the rate a year ago. Although the enemy continues to carry out sensational attacks, the number of car bombings and suicide attacks has been down in May and June. And because U.S. and Iraqi forces are living among the people they secure, many Iraqis are now coming forward with information on where the terrorists are hiding.

On the ground, our forces can see the difference the surge is making. General Petraeus recently described what he called "astonishing signs of normalcy." He said that about Baghdad. He talks about professional soccer leagues, and amusement parks, and vibrant markets. In the mixed Shia-Sunni neighborhood of Rashid, our foot patrols discovered a wall with two Arabic sentences spray-painted on them. It's just a small example. It certainly didn't get any news, but it says, "Yes, yes to the new security plan. No difference between Shia and Sunni."

The fight has been tough. It's a tough fight, and it is going to remain difficult. We have lost some good men and women. And even as our troops are showing some success in cornering and trapping al Qaeda, they face a lot of challenges. After all, the people of Iraq lived for decades under the brutal dictatorship that bred distrust. And so there's still sectarian tensions. The feelings are being exploited and they're being manipulated by outsiders. Iran, for example, continues to supply deadly IED explosives that are being used against American forces. It is also providing training in Iran, as well as funding and weapons for Iraqi militias. Meanwhile, Syria continues to be a transit station for al Qaeda and other foreign fighters on their way to Iraq.

The influx of foreign fighters and foreign support makes this job a lot tougher -- tougher on the Iraqis, tougher on our troops. We can expect more casualties as our forces enter enemy strongholds and push back against foreign interference. But General Petraeus and our commanders in Iraq have carefully laid out a plan that our forces are executing on the ground. It's a well conceived plan by smart military people, and we owe them the time and we owe them the support they need to succeed. (Applause.)

I fully agree with the military, that says this is more than a military operation. Have to be making tough decisions -- the Iraqis have got to be making tough decisions towards reconciliations. And that's why I will keep the pressure on Iraqi leaders to meet political benchmarks they laid out for themselves. At home, most of the attention has focused on important pieces of legislation that the Iraqi Parliament

must pass to foster political reconciliation -- including laws to share oil revenues, hold provincial elections, and bring more people into the political process. I speak to the Prime Minister and I speak to the Presidency Council quite often, and I remind them we expect the government to function, and to pass law.

Many Americans have been frustrated by the slow pace of legislation, as have I. However, I think we ought to put the challenge into perspective. In a democracy, the head of government just can't decree the outcome. (Laughter.) I'm not saying that's what I'd like to do. (Laughter.) Some in Washington are suggesting that's what I'd like to do. The Iraqi Parliament is composed of members representing many different religions and ethnicities: Sunnis, Shia, Turkoman, Kurds, and others.

Even in a long-established democracy, it's not easy to pass important pieces of legislation in a short period of time. We're asking the Iraqis to accomplish all these things at a time when their country is being attacked. I make no excuses, we will continue to keep the pressure up. We expect there to be reconciliation. We expect them to pass law.

On the benchmarks not related to legislation, they're doing better. Prime Minister Maliki promised to provide three brigades to support the operations in Baghdad -- and he did. Iraqi leaders promised to give military commanders the authority they need to carry out our plans, and for the most part, they have. In addition, Iraqis have helped reduce sectarian violence and established joint security stations. The Iraqi Ministry of Defense is working hard to improve its logistical capabilities. It's going to spend nearly $2 billion of its own funds this year to equip and modernize its forces. The Iraqi government appropriated $2 billion so their force can become more modern, so their force is more ready to take the fight to the enemy.

With the help of our troops, the Iraqi security forces are growing in number, they are becoming more capable, and coming closer to the day when they can assume responsibility for defending their own country. Not all this progress is even, and we're going to keep pressing the Iraqis to keep their commitments. Yet we must keep in mind that these benchmarks are aimed at improving life for the Iraqi people -- and that is the standard by which they should be judged.

To evaluate how life is improving for the Iraqis, we cannot look at the country only from the top down. We need to go beyond the Green Zone and look at Iraq from bottom up. This is where political reconciliation matters the most, because it is where ordinary Iraqis are deciding whether to support new Iraq or to sit on the fence, uncertain about the country's future. I'm encouraged, and more importantly, the people in Baghdad are encouraged by what we're seeing. Citizens are forming neighborhood watch groups. Young Sunnis are signing up for the army and police. Tribal sheiks are joining the fight against al Qaeda. Many Shia are rejecting the militias.

Much of the progress we are seeing is the result of the work of our Provincial Reconstruction Teams. These teams bring together military and civilian experts to help local Iraqi communities pursue reconciliation, strengthen moderates, and speed the transition to Iraqi self-reliance. PRTs in Anbar are working with Iraqi judges to restore the rule of law with new trials for terrorist detainees. The PRT in Ramadi helped the provincial council pass a budget that appropriates more than $100 million for capital expenditures so people can begin rebuilding their province and people can begin work. PRT in

Kirkuk is extending micro-loans to finance reconstruction and help stimulate job creation.

And the PRT in Ninewah has created more than 1,000 jobs through infrastructure projects that range from renovating a hospital to paving roads to building a new soccer field. This bottom-up approach to reconciliation and reconstruction is not headline-grabbing. You don't read a lot about it. But it is making a difference in the lives of Iraqi citizens, it is ongoing, and we need to make sure it continues.

We are also encouraged by the way Iraqis are responding to atrocities intended to inflame passions and provoke reprisals. In early 2006 -- things were going fine in 2005. You might remember at the end, we had an election where 12 million people showed up, an astonishing moment for the Middle East. And I frankly wasn't surprised, because I believe in the universality of freedom. I believe everybody wants to be free. That's what I believe. (Applause.)

I wasn't surprised, but I was pleased. I was pleased to hear the stories of Iraqis who got to vote, and their joy in voting. Al Qaeda wasn't pleased. As a matter of fact, they were frightened by the advance of democracy. You see, democracy is the opposite of their ideology. These folks believe something, it's just the opposite of what we believe. I remind people one of the great, precious gifts of America is the right for people to worship or not worship and be equally American; that we're all Americans -- (applause) -- that we're all Americans together, whether you're a Christian, Jew, Muslim or don't believe. It's the opposite of what al Qaeda believes. They believe if you don't worship the way they tell you to, they're likely going to kill you.

And so they didn't like the advance of democracy in 2005. And so in early 2006, they blew up the Golden Mosque in Samarra. It's one of Shia Islam's holiest sites. It set off a spiral of sectarian killing. Earlier this month, in an attack that had all the hallmarks of al Qaeda, the terrorists went back to their old playbook and blew up the minarets on the same mosque.

This time, Iraqi leaders united immediately in rejecting the attack. They took swift and aggressive actions to prevent a re-run of last year's violence. Prime Minister Maliki imposed a curfew, ordered additional security for holy places, and convened a meeting of Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish leadership. He traveled to Samarra with his Defense and Interior Ministers to demonstrate their commitment to peace and reconciliation. Now, look, there are still some reprisals that have occurred, and it's too early to judge whether the government's efforts will be enough to prevent a spiral of violence that we saw after last year's attacks. But it is not too early to say that the response by the Iraqi leadership has been impressive -- and very different from what it was the last time around.

One reason it is different is that the Iraqis are beginning to understand that al Qaeda is the main enemy for Shia, Sunni, and Kurds alike. Al Qaeda is responsible for the most sensational killings in Iraq. They're responsible for the sensational killing on U.S. soil, and they're responsible for the sensational killings in Iraq. Here at home, we see the bloody aftermath of a suicide bombing in an Iraqi market -- and we wonder what kind of people could do that. That's what we wonder. We're good-hearted people. Our commanders tell me that 80 to 90 percent of these suicide bombings are the work of foreign fighters, people who don't like the advance of an alternative to their ideology, and they come in and murder the innocent to achieve their objectives.

And that's their strategy. Al Qaeda's strategy is to use human beings as bombs to create grisly images for the world to see. They understand that sensational images are the best way to overwhelm the quiet progress on the ground. They aim to cultivate a sense of despair about the future of a free Iraq. They hope to gain by the television screen what they cannot gain on the battlefield against U.S. and Iraqi forces.

Our success in Iraq must not be measured by the enemy's ability to get a car bombing into the evening news. No matter how good the security, terrorists will always be able to explode a bomb on a crowded street. In places like Israel, terrorists have taken innocent human life for years in similar attacks. The difference is that Israel is a functioning democracy that is not prevented from carrying out its responsibilities. And that's a good indicator of success that we're looking for in Iraq: the rise of a government that can protect its people, deliver basic services for all its citizens, and function as a democracy even amid violence.

We're involved in a broader war against these ideological killers. Iraq is just a theater in this war. The extremists under this, that if the Middle East knows -- if the Middle East know that the Iraqis succeed, it's going to be a terrible blow to their ambitions. That's what they see. But they also feel the same way about Afghanistan, where the Taliban, one-time allies of al Qaeda, is trying to murder its way back into power; or in Lebanon, where extremists are trying to bring down that nation's democratic government; or in the Palestinian territories, where terrorists have set off a suicidal war; or in Iran, where the government pursues nuclear weapons while its president declares that Israel must be wiped off the map. The stakes are high in the beginning stages of this global war against ideologues that stand for the exact opposite of what America stands for. And what makes the war even more significant is that what happens overseas matters to the security in the United States of America, as we learned on September the 11th, when killers were able to use a failed state to plot the deadly attack. And so if we withdraw before the Iraqi government can defend itself, we would yield the future of Iraq to terrorists like al Qaeda -- and we would give a green light to extremists all throughout a troubled region.

The consequences for America and the Middle East would be disastrous. In Iraq, sectarian violence would multiply on a horrific scale. Fighting could engulf the entire region in chaos. We would soon face a Middle East dominated by Islamic extremists who would pursue nuclear weapons, who would use their control of oil for economic blackmail, and who would be in a position to launch new attacks on the United States of America. September the 11th, we saw how a failed state, like I'd just told you, can affect the security at home. And so for the sake of our own security, for the sake of the security of the United States of America, the United States must stand with millions of moms and dads throughout the Middle East who want a future of dignity and peace, and we must help them defeat a common enemy.

No one understands that better than the men and women in uniform. It is a huge honor to be the Commander-in-Chief of such a noble group of men and women. (Applause.) Our military is not only great, it's good, good-hearted people, all volunteers, who said, I want to serve in the face of danger. It's a remarkable country that can produce such good men and women.

I think of a fellow named Cory Endlich. Cory was an Ohio boy who wanted to join the Army so badly that his dad let him start training his senior year of high school. He was deployed to Iraq. It tells you something about his character that when his mom asked him if he needed anything, he said the only things he asked for -- she said the only things he asked for were coloring books, crayons, and candy

for the Iraqi children he had befriended. Earlier this month, he was killed. Here's what his dad said: "He felt the war was justified and wanted to be there." That's what his dad said. "I am proud of him and the job he is doing." And so am I. (Applause.)

Thank you all. I know you will join me in asking a loving God to hold the families of those who have lost a loved one in His loving hand. We resolve to honor their sacrifice by finishing the work they have begun. That's the task ahead of us. And when we do, we'll see a true legacy of a man like Sergeant Endlich: a dawn of a new Middle East where leaders are at peace with their own people, where children enjoy the opportunities their parents only dreamed of, and where America has new allies in the cause of freedom.

Thanks for letting me come today. God bless your work, and God bless our country. (Applause.)

Thank you all. Be seated. I've enjoyed my stay so much, I thought I might answer some questions -- (laughter) -- if you've got any, particularly from the students who might be curious. Yes, sir. You're the guy. Are you the mic man, or are you the questioner? Well, you're the questioner. Mic man, okay. Yes, sir.

Q Mr. President, it was my great privilege to be a representative of the Royal Navy here at the Naval Command College class of 1994. It's a huge privilege, clearly, to be here today, as well. We support and admire your country's commitment and sacrifice in Iraq, Afghanistan and around the world in the war on terror. But it strikes me that what you described today is very much a land-orientated campaign. What, if any, impact is that land campaign focus likely to have on your propensity to invest in a maritime strategy in the future, please?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, thanks. Yes. (Laughter.) Now who exactly invited you here? (Laughter.) Thank you, sir. Never mind, just kidding. (Laughter.) It is a land-based campaign, because that's where the enemy is. They hide in caves, and they hide in remote regions, and they try to destabilize countries. They try to create chaos. You've got to understand, chaos is the friend of these radicals. The more chaos there is, the more likely it is they'll be able to find a place to roost.

I know some people in our country just have trouble believing that they want to strike us again, but they do. That's what I live with every day. That's what Presidents do, they think about the threats, and they deal with them. And my attitude has been, let's keep the pressure on them. And the nation is going to have to do that. We're going to have to continually press. This means good intelligence, good special ops, working with allies like Great Britain -- who have been a fantastic country to work with, by the way, j ust got to pressure them. It's hard to plan and plot when you're on the move. And it takes a lot of work. It takes a lot of diplomacy, it takes a lot of military action, it takes a lot of good intel, and it's going to take a lot of determination by the United States.

In the meantime, we're going through a transformation of our forces. And one of the most transformative branches has been the Navy. It's amazing how the Navy has been able to accomplish more with less. Perhaps that's what you've been able to -- that's less manpower, more mission, better use of equipment, the capacity to manage manpower better. No question we're increasing our army and Marines, which some claim is part of the Navy -- (laughter) -- he doesn't claim it, yes. (Laughter.)

Well, we're not going there.

But our Navy is modern, and we'll keep it that way. The main thing for militaries, as we head into the 21st century, is constantly adjust to meet threat. And we've got a lot of money in our budget, and I hope that this new Congress keeps it that way for the Navy, as well as the rest of the military. It's really important. And it's important we continue to transform and become more interoperable. And that's really the challenge I presume you're studying this year at the university. Part of the strategic thought for our military is interoperability. And we're becoming much better at it -- at least that's what the commanders tell me. And that's important.

By the way, named a Navy man today, sent his name up to the Senate for confirmation as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Mullen; and Vice Chairman is going to be a Marine named "Hoss" Cartwright. They understand the need to continue to wage this war, and also to transform our military to meet the threats of the 21st century. And we're doing it.

One of the major transformative events we have done is we have begun to reposition our troops in Europe. The Cold War is over, it ended. And therefore the troop posture doesn't need to be the way it has been throughout the '50s, '60s and '70s. That's transformative. That also frees up money for capital investment, as well as different places where -- let me just say, the capacity to base out of home is going to save us a lot of money and save you a lot of wear and tear.

The volunteer army only works well if we take care of the wives and husbands; the spouses. (Applause.) And one way to do that is to reposition our forces to meet the threats of the 21st century. Well, it turns out, in many times -- it means they have to be based here, and be then in a capacity to move quickly to deal with the threats.

Anyway, thanks, good question. Great Britain has been a great ally. I said goodbye to my friend, Tony Blair, yesterday. I said hello to the new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. And there's no doubt in my mind we'll continue to have a good, close working relationship for the sake of peace; for doing the hard work necessary to make this world a peaceful place.

Surely there's more questions than that. (Laughter.)

Yes, ma'am.

Q Mr. President, I just returned from a week at the United States Army War College in Pennsylvania on national security. I walked away with so much more pride in our military. I would follow them anywhere. My question is: At the beginning of your speech -- that you said that you consult with the military. With all due respect, sir, how much do you really listen and follow them?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, a lot. I don't see how you can be the Commander-in-Chief of a well motivated military without listening carefully to the advice of your commanders. I talk to General Petraeus all the time. I say "all the time" -- weekly; that's all the time -- (laughter) -- on secure video from Baghdad. There's a lot of discussions about troop positioning; what will our footprint look like.

My answer is, it depends on what David Petraeus says. David Petraeus is the commander on the ground and he'll have the full support. And that's the way I do business. It's the way it's been throughout the -- you know, I told you that, and rightly so, that -- look, I had a decision to make: more troops to secure Baghdad and Anbar, or pull back and hope for the best? I made a decision to put more troops in. That was in close consultation with the Pentagon and in particular with the -- you know, the folks who have been charged with operations in Baghdad. And that's what you expect from the Commander in Chief.

We do have a chain of command. It goes from me to Gates to "Fox" Fallon to Petraeus. But a lot of times -- and we're all on the SVTS together -- the secure video together to talk about matters and -- so that's the way we do it, yes. Thanks for the question.

Yes, sir.

Q Thank you very much. Our family was touched by 9/11, and I want to thank you very much for the support of the 9/11 families. Peter Dutton is my name. I'm from the Naval War College faculty. I wanted to ask you about your thoughts concerning strategic culmination. Are we --

THE PRESIDENT: Strategic --

Q Strategic culmination. In other words, are we getting to the point where we're unable to continue to affect world events in other areas other than the Middle East because of our huge commitment there to the Middle East?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I appreciate that. Obviously, we're constantly balancing -- the first mission is, succeed in Iraq; let me just put it to you that way. And -- yes, I think we are. I think we're capable of dealing with more than one event at a time; witness the fact that we've got a lot of troops in Afghanistan. Fortunately, we've got a lot of NATO allies with us in Afghanistan. One of the things that I don't think a lot of people have really figured out is how successful we've been about putting -- about our ability to put coalitions together. There are a lot of troops in Iraq other than our own, and there's a lot of troops in Afghanistan other than our own.

The other hot spots, of course, would be the Far East. We've got a significant military presence there. We hope and pray that diplomacy works -- I think it will -- in dealing with the North Korean issue. But we got -- we're amply suited to deal with a lot of different theaters. But we're constantly watching; that's the job of the Joint Chiefs. Their job is to constantly monitor threats, positioning of troops, capabilities; and they bring them to my attention.

And I think people recognize that obviously -- you know, our military is undergoing through a lot of hard work and pressure. But according to them, they feel pretty good about it. And if they feel good about it, so do I.

Yes, sir.

Q Good morning, Mr. President. I wanted to say, thank you for your support for our military. I wanted to ask you your thoughts about our hospital ships that we've had. We had good success with the Mercy over in Indonesia and also pretty soon we're going to be having the Comfort now in deployment. I'd like to ask your thoughts about using these humanitarian missions as a way to fight the global war on terror.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, thank you very much. Our foreign policy is much more than the use of the military. I know the focus is on the military; it's, like, on TV everyday, I understand that. And that's normal during a time of combat. But our foreign policy is much broader than the use of military. You bring up the Navy ships, Comfort, for example, is just -- saving lives in South America and Central America. I remember going to see -- Laura and I went to Guatemala. We went to this remote region and ran into some military docs and nurses that were just providing essential health care. It's really effective diplomacy to help a mom deal with a child's sickness. And we do a lot of it. We get no credit for it, but we do a lot of it.

Our HIV/AIDS initiative on the continent of Africa -- first of all, I believe to whom much is given, much is required. We've been given a lot in the United States. It's in our interests, it's in our moral interests to help deal with the pandemic on the continent of Africa and elsewhere -- some in our neighborhood, like Haiti, for example. It's in our strategic interest to do so, as well. One of the lessons of this conflict we're in is that how people live matters as to whether or not the enemy is able to recruit. If you live in a society full of despair and hopelessness, it is more likely that you would become a suicide bomber or be swayed by an ideology that is really grim. Desperation is what these people prey on.

And, therefore, it's up to the United States, with our allies, by the way, to deal with desperate situations. I happen to believe that encouraging people and helping people to live in a free society is essential to our long-term security. I think that it is imperative that we have confidence in the ability of liberty to be a transforming agent for peace.

I worry about isolationism in America. I worry about the struggle -- which is going to take a while -- will cause us to lose our confidence in the ability to help others realize the blessings of liberty. I told you earlier I believe in the universality of freedom. It is a principle by which I have made decisions. I believe -- I personally believe there is an Almighty, and I believe a gift of the Almighty to each man, woman and child on the face of the Earth is freedom. That's what I believe.

And I have read a lot of history, as have you. I share the story about my friend, Prime Minister Koizumi, the former Prime Minister of Japan. I marvel at the fact -- or I used to marvel at the fact that my dad fought the Japanese as a United States Navy fighter pilot, and his son sits down at the table to work to keep the peace. It's an amazing -- to me it's an amazing irony, I guess is the best way to describe that -- that a fellow's father fought him, and I'm working to keep peace. We had no stronger ally -- and we still have a strong ally in Prime Minister Abe, by the way, from Japan -- but no stronger ally in recognizing that democracy is the long-term solution to defeating this ideological enemy. And Japan, our former enemy, was making sacrifices in Iraq and helping in Afghanistan.

We've got no stronger ally in working to peacefully solve the North Korean nuclear issue than Japan. And it is -- something happened between when H.W. Bush was flying torpedo bombers and W. was in

the White House. And what happened was, Japan changed its form of government. Liberty has got the capacity to change enemies to allies. And the fundamental question facing this country was, will we recognize that as we head into the 21st century? Do we care what life is like around the world, or are we going to hope for the best?

I care about what life is like around the world, and so should America. And, therefore, we ought to worry when people live under the thumb of a tyrant. Our foreign policy for years in the Middle East was stability. What mattered most was stability, are things stable. That, however, created conditions that enabled a group of killers to recruit people to come and kill us. And, therefore, I changed our foreign policy in the Middle East to promote liberty as the great alternative to tyranny and a dark vision.

Now, we're going to be kinetic if we need to be to protect ourselves. I've told you, we're going to stay on the offense and keep the pressure on them. But the long-term solution as to whether or not your grandkids can live in a peaceful world is whether or not we encourage liberty to take root around the Middle East, in particular. And people say, well, they can't possibly -- you know, that's not going to work.

Well, I suspect if you look back at history they might have been somewhat suspect if someone would have predicted an American President would be sitting down keeping the peace with the Japanese Prime Minister at some point -- particularly after World War II.

I think it's going to be very important for our country to have faith in the capacity of liberty to be transformative. Some say that's -- you know, he's a hopeless idealist guy. Well, I think it's realistic to understand that this is a long-term struggle and alternative ideologies need to be promoted. One particularly based upon hope, that's worked every time, when given a chance to take root. (Applause.)

That's not a seersucker suit, is it? (Laughter.) It's coming back, yes. They're coming back.

Q -- from Colombia.

THE PRESIDENT: From?

Q Colombia, class of 1979.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay. Thank you, sir.

Q First of all, I want to thank you for the support you are giving our country. And you have -- we know that your main goal is to win the situation in Iraq. I want to ask you which is your assessment for the situation in South America?

THE PRESIDENT: Sí, thank you. First, I am a big admirer of mi amigo, Presidente Uribe. He's strong -- that's the President of Colombia. (Laughter and applause.) He's strong, he's courageous, and he believes in democracy. And he was -- he started off in a really very tough problem, and that is dealing with a very rich group of people who are violent, but didn't necessarily agree with democracy. And I

admire the way he has led his nation.

A key moment in our relations with Colombia will be coming up pretty soon. And that is, we negotiated a free-trade agreement with your country. Why? Well, one, we did it because it's in our economic interests to open up markets for U.S. goods and services, just like it's in Colombia's interests to open up our markets for goods and services.

I believe in trade. I believe trade is in the interests of our workers. I think more markets -- listen, we're 5 percent of the people, that means 95 percent of the market should be available to our goods and services. When you're good at something, you ought to make it easier to sell it. We're good farmers, we ought to be selling our crops overseas to the extent they're not needed home. We're good manufacturers of a lot of products; we ought to be selling them.

I also believe that trade is the best way to lift people out of poverty. When there's commerce, when there's activity, when there's enterprise, a society has a better chance of enabling its people to realize dreams. So I'm a big trader -- a free-trader.

That's why we worked with the agreement with Colombia. Now the Congress is going to have an opportunity to determine whether or not they're going to be protectionist in nature and whether or not they'll turn -- this country will turn its back on our friend or not.

The free trade vote has a lot of strategic implications because in the neighborhood there is a person who is undermining a democracy, and therefore we need to be concerned about the loss of democracies in our neighborhood. Democracies yield peace. They don't war against each other. And when we see a democracy being undermined -- and I think it's going to be in the interests for the United States to work with friends in the neighborhood to promote the institutions necessary to prevent individuals from undermining a free society. What does that mean? Free media, the right to dissent, the capacity to have open elections.

So I've got good relations with a lot of the leaders in the neighborhood. And we're working very closely with Brazil, for example, on a lot of initiatives, starting with the biodiesel initiative. It's an interesting initiative, by the way. That has got -- that initiative is all done because of national security interests and economic interests as well as environmental concerns. And Brazil makes a lot of ethanol and we're beginning to make a lot of ethanol; it's in our interests to share technologies to promote others so we become less dependent on oil -- skipping around here.

My only point to you is that good relations with Brazil are necessary to work to make sure our neighborhood remains a peaceful place based upon the form of government. There's only one non-democracy in our neighborhood: that's Cuba. And I strongly believe the people of Cuba ought to live in a free society. It's in our interests that Cuba become free and it's in the interests of the Cuban people that they don't have to live under an antiquated form of government -- that has just been repressive.

So we'll continue to press for freedom on the island of Cuba. One day, the good Lord will take Fidel Castro away (laughter) -- no, no, no -- then, the question is, what will be the approach of the U.S. government? My attitude is, is that we need to use the opportunity to call the world together to promote

democracy as the alternative to the form of government they have been living with.

You'll see an interesting debate. Some will say, all that matters is stability, which in my judgment would just simply reinforce the followers of the current regime. I think we ought to be pressing hard for democracy.

I went overseas to the Czech Republic and gave a speech on democracy. I saw Vaclav Havel. You might remember him, he was the leader of the Velvet Revolution that helped lead Eastern Europe to a new form of government -- new forms of government. And he's very much interested in the United States' attitude toward Cuba, because he believes we need to be promoting freedom before stability.

It's going to be an interesting challenge for our country. We're working, by the way -- back to your question, can we do more than one thing at one time -- we're working very closely with the Navy and Coast Guard to make sure that there is not any issues when it comes between the United States and Cuba, should there be a -- when there is a transition.

Anyway, thanks for the question. I think I am somewhat concerned by the fact that -- you know, a lot of rhetoric is geared toward the Middle East and Africa and that people in the neighborhood say, well, the United States is not paying attention, nor do they care about us. That's just simply not the case. In my recent trip down there, I did go to Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia and Central America, and emphasized our humanitarian programs, the health programs, the education programs. I wanted to make it clear to the people of South and Central America that the United States cares deeply about the human condition, and that we believe that on the one hand, our government aid ought to make sure that we battle corruption -- we just don't give money to corrupt societies, that we ought to say that in return for our aid, change your habits if you're corrupt, otherwise you're not going to get additional money.

And at the same time, we believe we ought to foster programs aimed at the individual. And we are. We're spending a lot of money in South America. Now, we're not doing a very good job with the propaganda battle around the world. We created it, and we're losing. And that's one thing we've got to spend a lot of time on, is to make sure that the image of the United States corresponds to the realities on the ground.

Yesterday I went to a mosque -- Islamic Center in Washington, D.C. It's the 50th anniversary of the Islamic Center. It was a place where Dwight Eisenhower went to dedicate, and I went to rededicate it. And my message was, one, freedom is a beautiful thing, and that we expect societies to work toward freedom, and we want to do that. And at the same time, we honor all religion. That's what we do in America. And it is really meant to counter this notion that somehow America is in war against Islam. We're not. We're at war against killers who subvert a great religion in order to achieve their political objectives. And we'll keep working as hard as we can.

Anyway, great question. Look, I've got to go. I thank you all for coming by. God bless. (Applause.)

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