THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESIDENT
GEORGE W. BUSH

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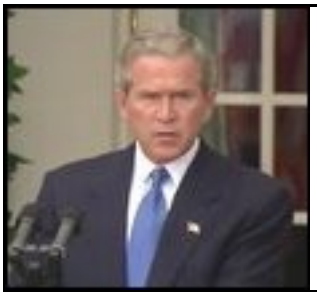
President's Remarks on Intelligence Reform

The Rose Garden

- In Focus: National Security
- en Español



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President's Remarks

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11:33 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thanks for coming. I appreciate the members of my administration joining me. Thank you all for being here.

My most solemn duty is to protect our country. It's our most solemn duty, as well. In the three years since our country was attacked, we've taken steps to overcome new threats. We will continue to do everything in our power to defeat the terrorist enemy and to protect the American people.

Recently, the commission on the terrorist attacks upon the United States came to a conclusion that I share: that our country is safer than it was on September the 11th, 2001, yet, we're still not safe. The commission members have worked hard and served our country well. I speak for all Americans in thanking them for their fine work.

Their recommendations are thoughtful and valuable. My administration has already taken numerous actions consistent with the commission's recommendations. Today, we're taking additional steps. Our government's actions against the terrorist threat accelerated dramatically after the attacks on the country. Across the world, we've aggressively pursued al Qaeda terrorists, destroyed their training camps and ended their sanctuaries.

We're working closely with other countries to gather intelligence and to make arrests and to cut off terrorist finances. We've created a new unified Department of Homeland Security and gave it resources and the authority to defend America. We're employing the latest equipment and know-how to secure our borders, air and sea ports and infrastructure. We're bringing the best technologies to bear against the threat of chemical and biological warfare. Project Bioshield will fund cutting-edge drugs and other defenses against a biological, chemical, or radiological attack.

To track terrorists and disrupt their cells and seize their assets, we're using the tools of the Patriot Act. Congress needs to extend this important law. Congress needs to make sure law enforcement have the tools necessary to defend the country. We've transformed the FBI to focus on the prevention of terrorist attacks. We're continuing to expand and strengthen the capabilities of the Central Intelligence Agency. We established the Terrorist Threat Integration Center to merge and analyze in a single place foreign and domestic intelligence on global terror.

Yet, the work of securing this vast nation is not done. The elevation of the threat level in New York and New Jersey and Washington, D.C. is a serious reminder, a solemn reminder of the threat we continue to face. All the institutions of our government must be fully prepared for a struggle against terror that will last into the future. Our goal is an integrated, unified national intelligence effort. Therefore, my administration will continue moving forward with additional changes to the structure and organization of our intelligence agencies.

Many of these changes are specific recommendations of the 9/11 Commission. Other will go further than the proposal of the commission's report. All these reforms have a single goal: We will ensure that the people in government responsible for defending America and countering terrorism have the best possible information to make the best decisions.

Today I'm asking Congress to create the position of a National Intelligence Director. That person -- the person in that office will be appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate, and will serve at the pleasure of the President. The National Intelligence Director will serve as the President's principal intelligence advisor and will oversee and coordinate the foreign and domestic activities of the intelligence committee. Under this reorganization, the CIA will be managed by a separate Director. The National Intelligence Director will assume the broader responsibility of leading the intelligence community across our government.

I want, and every President must have, the best, unbiased, unvarnished assessment of America's intelligence professionals. Creating the position of the National Intelligence Director will require a substantial revision of the 1947 National Security Act. I look forward to working with the members of Congress to move ahead on this important reform.

The 9/11 Commission also made several recommendations about Congress, itself. I strongly agree with the commission's recommendation that oversight and intelligence -- oversight of intelligence and of the homeland security must be restructured and made more effective. There are too many committees with overlapping jurisdiction, which wastes time and makes it difficult for meaningful oversight and reform.

Today, I also announce that we will establish a National Counter-Terrorism Center. This new center

will build on the analytical work, the really good analytical work of the Terrorist Threat Integration Center, and will become our government's knowledge bank for information about known and suspected terrorists. The new center will coordinate and monitor counter-terrorism plans and activities of all government agencies and departments to ensure effective joint action, and that our efforts are unified in priority and purpose. The center will also be responsible for preparing the daily terrorism threat report for the President and senior officials.

The Director of the National Counterterrorism Center will report to the National Intelligence Director, once that position is created. Until then, the center will report to the Director of the CIA. Given the growing threat of weapons and missile proliferation in our world, it may also be necessary to create a similar center in our government to bring together our intelligence analysis planning and operations to track and prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

I asked the commission headed by Judge Laurence Silberman and Senator Chuck Robb to determine the merits of creating such a center. This nation must do everything we can to keep the world's most destructive weapons out of the world's most dangerous hands.

Finally, we will act on other recommendations made by the commission. In coming days, I'll issue a series of directives to various departments to underscore and further outline essential steps for the U. S. government on the war on terror. All relevant agencies must complete the task of adopting common databases and procedures so that intelligence and homeland security information can be shared and searched effectively, consistent with privacy and civil liberties.

At the same time, the FBI Director will continue his restructuring of the bureau to create a specialized work force for collecting and analyzing domestic intelligence on terrorism. The acting CIA Director will continue to increase efforts already underway to strengthen human intelligence and analytical capabilities.

The dedicated, hardworking men and women of our intelligence community are laboring every day to keep our country safe. I'm proud of their work, and so should our American citizens. We're in their debt, we're grateful for them. And the changes we're making are designed to help the professionals carry out their essential missions, as best as they possibly can. I'll work closely with the Congress to ensure that reform does not disrupt their daily work. We've got good people working hard to protect America. We don't want these efforts to step -- to get in the way of their efforts to protect our fellow citizens.

We are a nation in danger. We're doing everything we can in our power to confront the danger. We're making good progress in protecting our people and bringing our enemies to account. But one thing is for certain: We'll keep our focus and we'll keep our resolve and we will do our duty to best secure our country.

I'll answer a couple of questions today. Scott, have you got one?

Q Yes, Mr. President. First, I'd like to ask you what the level of urgency is here on those actions that require congressional approval. They're out on recess until Labor Day. Can you envision calling them

back into special session? And, also, you've got a terror warning, as you said, in three cities. How do you react, without tipping the bad guys off and without turning the country into a fortress?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, the first question is -- the Congress has been thinking about some of these ideas. They can think about them over August and come back and act on them in September. We look forward to working with them. Not only the creation of the National Intelligence Director, how to do it the right way, but also the 9/11 Commission had some very constructive suggestions for congressional reform. I think Tom told me one time he -- how many different committees have you testified in front of?

SECRETARY RIDGE: Well, 140 times our leadership was up there last year.

THE PRESIDENT: He testified 140 different times.

SECRETARY RIDGE: Leadership.

THE PRESIDENT: And --

SECRETARY RIDGE: The leadership -- under secretaries --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. I mean, it's a lot of -- he's got a lot of jurisdictions up there, and so he goes committee, subcommittee, this committee, that committee. I mean, it seems like it's one thing to testify, and there to be oversight, it's another thing to make sure that the people who are engaged in protecting America don't spend all their time testifying. And so there's going to be some important reforms. We look forward to working with Congress on the reforms.

The second part of your two-part question?

Q In a situation like this -- in a situation like this, where you have this new terror alert, how do you react without tipping off the terrorists and having them move to different targets, and how do you avoid turning the country into a fortress?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I appreciate that. I think we have an obligation to inform the people involved with protecting New York City, in this case, or parts of Jersey, or parts of D.C. about what we know. We have an obligation. When we find out something, we've got to share it. What we're talking about here is a very serious matter based upon sound intelligence. And I would hope the people affected in New York realize that by sharing intelligence we can better prepare in case something were to happen.

In other words, if we were just silent on the subject, I think -- I think people would be a lot more nervous. They would say, what is government withholding, why weren't they sharing stuff with the people responsible -- Commissioner Kelly, or Mayor Bloomberg? So our attitude is, we try to be as transparent as possible with the affected sites so that people can then take responses necessary to better protect the people.

But it's serious business. We wouldn't be contacting authorities at the local level unless something was real. And what this points up to is that there's an enemy which hates what we stand for. And it's a different kind of war. And it's one that we're just going to have to continue to work on, and will -- do the very best we can to protect the country.

Adam.

Q Mr. President, some of your own advisors oppose creation of a National Intelligence Director. Why did you override their objections? And will you give the new director sweeping budget authority?

THE PRESIDENT: Because I thought it was the right thing to do, Adam. And the good thing about having an administration full of competent, capable, intelligence people is that I get all different kinds of opinions. The best decision-making process is one where people have different opinions, and they bring them to me in a forthright way, and then I make the decision about what I think is best. And I think that the new National Intelligence Director ought to be able to coordinate budgets. I certainly hope Congress reforms its budget process, too, so that it's a seamless process.

Secondly, the National Intelligence Director will work with the respective agencies to set priorities. But let me make it also very clear that when it comes to operations, the chain of command will be intact. When the Defense Department is conducting operations to secure the homeland, there'll be nothing in between the Secretary of Defense and me. I believe this system will serve our country well as we head into the depths of the 21st century. As I said in my remarks here, that this struggle against these thugs will go on for a while, and therefore we've just got to do everything we can to be better prepared.

Gregory.

Q Mr. President, thank you. All of this as you know is coming in the context of the presidential election campaign. Your opponent has made a couple of charges that I would like your response to. One, essentially saying that three years after the 9/11 attacks, to go about the business of rehauling the intelligence community is too long. Second, there's been a suggestion from the Kerry camp today that this administration is actually responsible for fueling the recruitment of al Qaeda through some of its policies, particularly -- they didn't say this directly -- but the war in Iraq. Your response?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, that's a misunderstanding of the war on terror. Obviously, we have a clear -- a difference of opinion, a clear difference of opinion about the stakes that face America. These people we face are cold-blooded, committed killers. They're interested in destroying our way of life. They were interested in destroying our way of life before I arrived in office. The only way to deal with these people is to bring them to justice.

See, evidently some must think that you can negotiate with them, you can talk sense to them, you can hope that they change. That's not what I know. I know in order to deal with these people we must bring them to justice before they hurt us again. And so we're on the offense. We will stay -- the best way to protect the American homeland is to stay on the offense. It is a ridiculous notion to assert that because the United States is on the offense, more people want to hurt us. We are on the offense because people do want to hurt us.

The other part of your question was, what, sir?

Q Why wait three years after the 9/11 attacks to call for this kind of reform? Senator Kerry has said that's too long.

THE PRESIDENT: We have implemented significant reforms since 9/11. The FBI is reformed, and Director Mueller is doing a fabulous job. The communications between the FBI and the CIA are -- have been enhanced by the creation of what's called TTIC, the Terrorist Threat Integration Center. We moved quickly to make sure that there is a seamless spread of information throughout our government. We created -- called for and worked with Congress to create the Department of Homeland Security. Not everybody in Congress agreed with how that Department ought to be set up. But we got it set up, and not only that, under Secretary Ridge we have implemented the integration of multiple agencies to better protect the homeland. We've done a lot since September the 11th.

Let's see here. Jay Newton Small. How are you?

Q Good, and you?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm fine.

Q Mr. President, the 9/11 Commission originally recommended that the National Intelligence Director be part of the executive office, part of the executive branch. Why the change? Why make it part of -- with congressional oversight?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't think that person ought to be a member of my Cabinet. I will hire the person, and I can fire the person, which is -- any President would like. That's how you have accountability in government. I don't think that the office ought to be in the White House, however. I think it ought to be a stand-alone group, to better coordinate, particularly between foreign intelligence and domestic intelligence matters. I think it's going to be one of the most useful aspects of the National Intelligence Director.

Let's see. John, or Mike. Why don't you, and then John Cochran.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. You saw that Doctors Without Borders pulled out of Afghanistan because it was too dangerous. You've seen reports about the re-formed Taliban. Why is the situation, security situation there so poor? What do you see as the trajectory of it? And, Mr. President, do you worry that you should have given more attention to Iran earlier?

THE PRESIDENT: First, let me address Afghanistan. I did see that the Doctors Without Borders left, and I'm sorry they did, because they were providing an important function for the people who want to live in a free society. I also saw, at the same time, that there's over, I think it's 9 million Afghan citizens have registered to vote. That's an unbelievable statement, isn't it? Do you remember when we were here -- I can't remember, at one of my press conferences, we had a discussion about this, but there was some concern that, well, maybe they're not going to get even the 3 million people registered to

vote in Afghanistan. Or maybe it was -- some minimal threshold. I think we're over 9 million now?

SECRETARY RIDGE: Yes, just about 9 million.

THE PRESIDENT: Nine million people have said to the world, we love freedom and we're going to vote. Now, the Taliban still roams in parts of the country, and we're working with the Afghan government to bring them to justice. These are similar to the killers in Iraq; they'll lurk in shadows and come out and kill indiscriminately.

Do you remember they pulled the women off the bus? They got the bus, they stopped and said everybody -- the women with voter registration cards step off, and they killed them. Nevertheless, the Afghan people refuse to be intimidated. They're showing up in droves to vote. A free society is emerging in that part of the world.

In Iran, we are paying very close attention to Iran. We have ever since I've been in office here. We are working with our friends to keep the pressure on the mullahs to listen to the demands of the free world. And we're working with the -- hold on a second, please. Excuse me. We're working with the IAEA to keep the pressure on Iran, and the Secretary is working very closely with the foreign ministers of France, Great Britain and Germany, who are taking it upon themselves to make it clear that the demands of Europe are also equal to -- the same as the demands of the United States, that we expect there to be full disclosure, full transparency of their nuclear weapons programs.

Yes, Suzanne. Suzanne.

Q Do you think the intelligence was --

THE PRESIDENT: Suzanne.

Q Mr. President, your opponent, John Kerry, has called for a complete endorsement of the 9/11 Commission's recommendations. How do your actions today differ from his own in ensuring national security? And what can the American people see in the days to come, either feel or see, to know that they are better protected?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, when we put out a threat alert like we did yesterday, and then work with folks at the local jurisdictions to respond, the American people need to know that, one, our intelligence gathering is doing its job -- the intelligence gatherers are doing their job. And, secondly, the response mechanism is fast. And they need to know their government -- there are thousands of people working overtime to not only find data, but analyze data, and then take the steps necessary to protect, as best as we possibly can. This is a big country. We're a free country, and as I've said many times, we've got to be a hundred percent correct, they're got to be correct once. But the people need to know that we're taking action on actionable intelligence.

First part of the -- the 9/11 -- listen, my job is to take a look at what I think is right, and to build on that which we've already done. We've already done a lot. Take a good look at what has taken place since

9/11, and I think you'll be -- as a citizen, concerned about your own safety, I think you'll be pleased. And the question is, how do we do more? We're more than happy to do more.

Last question. Deans.

Q Yes, sir. Mr. President, would you say -- can you say what you regard as the model for this National Intelligence Director? Is it the Fed, would it be the Joint Chiefs of Staff? And in what way would this new structure prevent the kind of intelligence failings that preceded the war in Iraq with respect to weapons, difficulty of the opposition faced, and those sorts of things?

THE PRESIDENT: Not like the Fed. More like the Joint Chiefs, because the Joint Chiefs have got a -- even though not a part of the chain of command, they are affected by the chain of command.

And the second part of the -- oh, why would this -- listen, let me talk about the intelligence in Iraq. First of all, we all thought we would find stockpiles of weapons. We may still find weapons. We haven't found them yet. Every person standing up here would say, gosh, we thought it was going to be different, as did the Congress, by the way, members of both parties, and the United Nations. But what we do know is that Saddam Hussein had the capability of making weapons.

And let me just say this to you: Knowing what I know today, we still would have gone on into Iraq. We still would have gone to make our country more secure. He had the capability of making weapons. He had terrorist ties. The decision I made was the right decision. The world is better off without Saddam Hussein in power. And I find it interesting, in the political process, that some say, well, I voted for the intelligence, and now they won't say whether or not it was the right decision to take Saddam Hussein out. It's the right decision, and the world is better off for it.

Listen, thank you all.

END 11:58 A.M. EDT

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