THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESIDENT
GEORGE W. BUSH

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Vice President's Remarks at a Rally for the Troops at Scott Air Force Base

Scott Air Force Base
Scott Air Force Base, Illinois

11:36 A.M. CST

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. (Applause.) Thank you. (Applause.) Well, thank you very much. And, Colonel, I want to thank you for the kind words and for the invitation to be here today. I've been looking forward to this visit because Scott Air Force Base is truly one of the finest in the United States. And I want to thank General Schwartz, General McNabb, Admiral Reilly, and General Fletcher for their leadership here.

I am here, very simply, to say thanks to every person, military or civilian, who serves here at Scott, and to recognize the extraordinary contributions of the 375th Airlift Wing. (Applause.) I want to thank all the members of the tenant units, the reservists of the 932nd Airlift Wing. Don't hold back. It's all right. (Applause.) The 126th Air Refueling Wing of the Air National Guard -- (Applause.) And the units headquartered here: TRANSCOM -- (Applause.) Headquarters Air Mobility Command -- (Applause.) The Air Force Communications Agency -- (Applause.) And the Defense Information Systems Agency -- (Applause.)

I first got to be familiar with the work of Scott Air Force Base in the early '90s, when I served as Secretary of Defense -- in the old days when I had real power and influence. (Laughter.) But throughout my time in public service, one of the greatest honors I've had has been the opportunity to work with the men and women of the United States military -- from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to all the officers and enlisted personnel that I've met at home and abroad. In all of you I see the very best of America. I admire your commitment to discipline, to duty, and to service above self. It's a privilege to be in your company, and I bring the respect and good wishes of our Commander-in-Chief, President George W. Bush. (Applause.)

I'm also pleased to see the family members who've joined us today. America depends heavily on the people of Scott Air Force Base, and they all depend on the love and support of their families. The military life carries both rewards and sacrifices, and these are shared by the spouses and the children. I want you to know that America is grateful to all of our military families. (Applause.)

These are eventful times for the United States, and for the people who wear our nation's uniform. And this Air Force base in the heart of America is at the very center of many critical assignments. I've just had a set of briefings this morning on the work you've been doing, and I'm very impressed with what I saw. The personnel of Scott Air Force Base are a superb representation of the total force, which is so vital to the functioning of the United States military. All the logistics of the U.S. Armed Forces -- in the air, over land, and across oceans and continents -- are directed here with incredible precision, efficiency, and speed. The high volume of work, the intense time constraints involved, and the sheer complexity of the task demand the utmost of everybody. And that's what you're giving, hour by hour and day by day. Simply stated: Were it not for all of you, this nation could not have started, supported, or sustained our major operations in the global war on terror. That war goes on, and thanks in part to all of you, it's a war that we are going to win. (Applause.)

You've also undertaken challenges close to home, as we saw in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina -- when you handled the evacuation of thousands of survivors and delivered millions of meals and tons of cargo. You were swift and skillful in a time of need for fellow citizens, and I know the people of the Gulf Coast will never forget what you did for them.

This nation looks to our military to serve our highest ideals abroad, and to defend America against those who want to harm us. And our military is repaying that confidence every single day. When America was attacked on a terrible September morning four-and-a-half years ago, President Bush said that the struggle ahead would be lengthy and difficult, and would require our fullest effort and unfailing resolve. And in this fight some of the hardest duties have come to our people in uniform.

Just before Christmas I had the chance to visit Afghanistan and Iraq, and to meet with some of our folks deployed to those countries. I thanked them for their service, and for all they've done to bring freedom, stability, and peace to a troubled part of the world. Afghanistan a little over four years ago was in the grip of a violent, merciless regime that harbored terrorists who plotted murder for export. There is still tough fighting going on in that country, some of it in very rough terrain, high in the mountains and along the border areas. But our people are getting the job done, together with coalition partners and an increasingly strong and professional Afghan military. And Afghanistan is a rising nation -- with a democratically-elected government, a market economy, and millions of children going to school for the very first time. It's impossible to overstate all that our coalition has achieved in Afghanistan -- and when our forces return home from that part of the world, they can be proud of their service for the rest of their lives.

I brought that same message to our people serving in Iraq. It's been three years since America and our allies went in to remove Saddam Hussein from power, to liberate the Iraqi people, and to help them replace tyranny with democracy. This was a dictator who had

brutalized the Iraqi people, invaded neighboring countries, harbored terrorists, provided money to the families of suicide bombers, and declared America to be his enemy. To take just one example, 15 years before the liberation of Iraq began, Saddam Hussein ordered the gassing of thousands of Iraqi Kurds in Halabja in March, 1988. Saddam Hussein is still the same madman, but without power and without a throne. He will never again have the power to threaten others, and the world is better for it. (Applause.)

As the Iraqi people step forward to participate in the government of their country, the terrorists will continue to commit acts of random terror, calculated to shock and intimidate the civilized world. There is no doubt that the situation in Iraq is still tense. The terrorists know that as freedom takes hold, the ideologies of hatred and resentment will lose their appeal, and the advance of democracy will inspire reformers across the broader Middle East. And as that region experiences new hope and progress, we will see the power of freedom to lift up whole nations, and the spread of liberty will produce a much safer world for our children and our grandchildren. The war on terror is a battle for the future of civilization. It's a battle worth fighting. It's a battle we're going to win. (Applause.)

Our strategy in Iraq is clear, our tactics will remain flexible, and we'll keep at the task until we finish the job. Progress has not come easily, but it has been steady, and we can be confident going forward. First, as all of you know very well, the United States military is doing remarkable, heroic, honorable work each and every day. Second, the Iraqi people themselves deserve to be free -- and they want to be free. By voting in elections, by ratifying their constitution, by going to the polls with an amazing voter turnout rate of more than 70 percent, Iraqis have shown that they value their own liberty and are determined to choose their own destiny. And America is proud to stand at their side.

Our coalition has also put great effort into standing up the Iraqi Security Forces, and we've come a great distance over the past year. We're helping to build an Iraqi force that is well trained and well equipped, and this was important to the success of the elections last December, and played a vital role in maintaining public order after our enemies tried to ignite a civil war by destroying the Golden Dome of Samarra, one of Shia Islam's holiest shrines.

Today the number of battalions in the fight is increasing and Iraqi forces are now conducting more independent operations throughout the country than do coalition forces. Gradually, Iraqi forces are taking control of more Iraqi territory. Today, Iraqi units have primary responsibility for more than 30,000 square miles of the country -- an increase of roughly 20,000 square miles since the beginning of the year. And as President Bush has indicated, Iraqi forces are taking that responsibility for more and more of Iraq's territory. And as they undertake further missions on their own, confidence is growing within the country and increasingly more and more intelligence tips are coming in from the people themselves.

As the Iraqi forces gain strength and experience, and as the political process advances, we'll be able to decrease troop levels without losing the capacity to defeat the terrorists. And as always, decisions about troop levels will be driven by the conditions on the ground and the judgment of our military commanders on the scene -- not by artificial timelines set by politicians in Washington, D.C. (Applause.)

Recently there have been some prominent voices advocating a sudden withdrawal of our forces from Iraq. Some have suggested that the war is not winnable, a few seem almost eager to conclude that the whole struggle is already lost. But they are wrong. The only way to lose this fight is to quit -- and that is not an option. (Applause.)

Every American serving in this war can be absolutely certain that the people of our country do not support a policy of passivity, resignation, and defeatism in the face of terror. The United States will never go back to the false comforts of the world before September 11th, 2001. Terrorist attacks are not caused by the use of strength. They are invited by the perception of weakness. (Applause.)

In the past, terrorists hit America and we did not hit back hard enough. They came to believe that if they killed enough Americans they could change our policy. And they are now trying to intimidate us into a policy of withdrawal and retreat. But this nation has made a decision: We will engage these enemies -- facing them far from home, so we do not have to face them on the streets of our own cities. (Applause.)

In the war on terror we face a loose network of committed fanatics, found in many countries, operating under different commanders. Yet the branches of this network share the same basic ideology, the same dark vision for the world -- and they view the entire world as a battlefield. The terrorists want to end American and Western influence in the Middle East. Their goal in that region is to gain control of a country, so they have a base from which they can launch attacks and wage war against governments that do not meet their demands. The terrorists believe that by controlling an entire country, they will be able to target and overthrow other governments in the region, and to establish a radical Islamic empire that encompasses that part of the world from Spain, across North Africa, through the Middle East and South Asia, all the way around to Indonesia.

They have made clear, as well, their ultimate ambitions: to arm themselves with weapons of mass destruction, to destroy Israel, to intimidate all Western countries, and to cause mass death here in the United States. In the face of such a threat, those of us in positions of responsibility have a duty to wage a broad-scale effort for the sake of this nation's freedom and security.

That effort includes a home front, which is every bit as important as the battlefields abroad. In his speech to Congress after 9/11, President Bush said the United States would, "direct every resource at our command -- every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war -- to the disruption and the defeat of the global terror network." The Congress backed him up in full, authorizing the President to defeat an enemy that had already slipped into our country and waged a horrific attack against innocent, unsuspecting men, women, and children, killing 3,000 of our fellow citizens on that September morning.

The President also signed the Patriot Act, which is helping us to disrupt terrorist activity, break up terror cells within the United States, and protect the lives of Americans. Another vital step the President took in the days following 9/11 was to authorize the National Security Agency to intercept a certain category of terrorist-linked international communications. There are no communications more important to the safety of the United States than those related to al Qaeda that have one end in the United States.

If you'll recall, the report of the 9/11 Commission focused criticism on our inability to uncover links between terrorists at home and terrorists abroad. Two of the terrorists prior to 9/11 were in San Diego, placing calls outside the United States to al Qaeda-related individuals overseas. The authorization the President made after September 11th helped address that problem in a manner that is fully consistent with the constitutional responsibilities and legal authority of the President and with the civil liberties of the American people. The activities conducted under this authorization have helped to detect and prevent possible terrorist attacks against the American people. They are within the President's authority under the Constitution and laws of the land. And they are vital to the security of our country.

We are talking here about a wartime measure, limited in scope to surveillance associated with terrorists, and conducted in a way that safeguards the civil liberties of all of us. It's important to note that leaders of Congress have been briefed more than a dozen times on the President's authorization, and on activities conducted under it. I have personally presided over most of those briefings. In addition, the entire program is reconsidered and reauthorized by the President every 45 days -- completely reviewed every time before he continues it. He has reauthorized it more than 30 times since September 11th -- and he has indicated his intent to do so as long as our nation faces a continuing threat from al Qaeda and related organizations.

Bottom line: We will not sit back and wait to be struck again. (Applause.)

It seems more than obvious to say that our nation is still at risk of attack. Yet as we get farther away from September 11th, 2001, some in Washington are yielding to the temptation to downplay the threat, and to back away from the business at hand. That mindset is dangerous. We're all grateful that this nation has gone more than four years without another 9/11. Obviously, no one can guarantee that we won't be hit again. But getting through four years of wartime without an attack on the homeland took more than just luck. We've been protected by sensible policy decisions by the President, by decisive action at home and abroad, and by round-the-clock efforts on the part of all of you in the armed services, law enforcement, intelligence, and homeland security.

The enemy that struck on 9/11 is weakened and fractured, yet still lethal and still determined to hit us again. We have faced, and are facing today, enemies who hate us, who hate our country, and who hate the liberties for which we stand. They dwell in the shadows, wear no uniform, have no regard for the laws of warfare, and feel unconstrained by any standards of morality. It's a serious fight -- and we have a lot more to do before it's finished. Either we are serious about fighting this war or we are not. And the enemies of America need to know: We are serious, and we will not let down our guard. (Applause.)

Ladies and gentlemen, as members of the United States Armed Forces, each one of you is helping to

write a proud chapter in the history of freedom. At times you may wonder if your fellow citizens truly realize the extent of your achievements. I want you to know that Americans do realize it -- and we do not take our military for granted. We look with admiration on all of you: superbly trained men and women who put the mission first, work as a team, put in long hours, and carry out highly technical assignments with excellence. We appreciate our fellow citizens who go out on lengthy deployments and endure the hardship of separation from home and family. We care about those who have returned with injuries, and who face a hard road ahead. And our nation grieves for the brave men and women whose lives have ended in freedom's cause. No one can take away the sorrow that comes to the families of the fallen. We can only say, with complete certainty, that these Americans served in a noble and a necessary cause, and their sacrifice has made our nation and the world more secure. We will honor their memory forever. (Applause.)

None of us can know every turn that lies ahead for America in the fight against terror. Yet the direction of events is plain to see, and this period of struggle and testing is also a time of promise. The United States of America is a good country, a decent country, and we are making the world a better place by defending the innocent, confronting the violent, and bringing freedom to the oppressed. We understand the continuing dangers to civilization, and we have the resources, the strength, and the moral courage to overcome those dangers and to lay the foundations for a better world.

Each of you is part of that great effort. You have dedicated yourself to serving our country and its ideals, and you are meeting that commitment during a very challenging hour in American history. You've been focused and tireless. And you've built a record of tremendous results all across the board. This is a fantastic team at Scott Air Force Base: You stick together, you bring out the best in each other, you get the job done for America. And the entire country is very proud of you.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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