THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESIDENT
GEORGE W. BUSH

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President Bush Discusses Global War on Terror

Central Piedmont Community College
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- In Focus: National Security
- In Focus: Renewal in Iraq

VIDEO Multimedia

President's Remarks

view

10:45 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Firoz, thanks a lot. So I said, that's an interesting name. He said, I've lived in seven countries. But he also said he's proud to be an American. And we're proud you're an American. Thank you very much for inviting me. (Applause.)

You know, I was just standing here, listening to Firoz; one of the great things about our country is that you can come and you can enjoy the great blessings of liberty and you can be equally American if you've been here for one generation or 10 generations. I thought it was neat that somebody who has been -- you've been here 27 years though, right? Yes. Well, seven countries, 27 years here, introducing the President though. I think it says a lot about the United States of America. Thanks for having me.

I'm looking forward to sharing with you what's on my mind. I look forward to hearing what's on yours, as well. First thing is, Laura sends her best to the folks of Charlotte. She sends her best, Tony, to you and your bride. Thank you for having us here, to the Central Piedmont. I appreciate your involvement in education. I married well; she's a really patient person, too. (Laughter.)

I traveled down here with Congressman Robin Hayes, the Congressman from this district. Congressman, thank you for being here, appreciate it. (Applause.) I've known your Mayor for a long time. He's a man of accomplishment. I know he was particularly proud to land the NASCAR Hall of Fame. (Applause.) Pretty big deal, you know? It's a pretty big deal. Thank you all for coming. I want to thank the others who serve on the City Council who are here. The Mayor was telling me a lot of the council members are here. I appreciate your service to your city.

I think one of the things I'd like to tell you about is why and how I made some decisions I made. My friends from Texas who, once they get over the shock that I'm actually the President -- (laughter) -- like to ask me what it's like to be President. And I guess the simple job description would be, it is a decision-making experience. And I make a lot of decisions. Some of them you see, some of them you don't see. Decision making requires knowing who you are and what you believe. I've learned enough about Washington to know you can't make decisions unless you make them on principle. And once you make a decision based upon principle, you stand by what you decide.

In order to make good decisions, you've got to rely upon good people. People have got to feel comfortable about coming in the Oval Office and tell you what's on their mind. There's nothing worse than people walking in, say, well, I'm a little nervous around the guy, I think I'd better tell him what he thinks he needs to hear.

You can't do the country justice, you can't make good decisions unless you've got a lot of good, competent people around you, and I do -- Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State; Don Rumsfeld -- (applause) -- the Vice President. These are people who have seen good times, and they've seen tough times. But in all times, they're capable of walking in and telling me what's on their mind. That's what you need as the President. And then once you make up your mind, they say, yes -- yes, sir, Mr. President, I'll get it done.

The biggest decision I've had to make since I've been your President is putting kids in harm's way. It's a decision no President wants to make. It's a decision I wish I did not have to make. But I'd like to share with you why I made the decision I made.

First of all, war came to our shores on September the 11th, 2001. It was a war we did not ask for, it's a war we did not want, but it is a war that I intend to deal with so long as I'm your President. (Applause.) In order to deal with this war on terror, you've got to understand the nature of the enemy. And I'll share my thoughts with -- about this enemy we face.

They're an enemy bound together by an ideology. These are not folks scattered around that are kind of angry and lash out at an opportune moment. These are people that are -- believe something, and their beliefs are totalitarian in nature. They believe you should not be able to worship freely. They believe that young girls should not go to school. They've got a perverted sense of justice. They believe in the use of violence to achieve their objectives. Their stated objectives, their stated goals are to spread their totalitarian view throughout the Middle East. That's what they want to do.

They have made it abundantly clear that they believe folks who live in America are weak, that we don't have the will to compete with their philosophy. That's what they believe. I'm just telling you what they said. I think it's really important in a time of war for the President to take the words of the enemy very seriously. And I do.

They think that the use of violence will cause us to lose our nerve and retreat. And they have stated that they want safe haven from which to not only topple moderate governments in the Middle East, but from which to launch attacks against the United States. Given that in mind, I'd like to share some of the lessons learned. One lesson is the nature of the enemy.

Another lesson is, is that we must defeat the enemy overseas so we don't have to face them here again. And that requires a strategy that is offensive in mind: press the enemy, find the enemy, bring the enemy to justice, never relent, never give them quarter, understand you cannot negotiate with these people. You can't rationalize with these people, that you must stay on the hunt and bring them to justice. This is precisely what we're doing.

One, obviously, immediate target is to dismantle al Qaeda. They hide in kind of the far reaches of the world. They plot and plan, however, from the far reaches of the world. They're good at communications. They're good at deception. They're good at propaganda. And they want to strike again. We have done a good job of dismantling the operating structure of al Qaeda -- Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, Ramzi Binalshibh -- a series of these folks that have become the operating element of al Qaeda. Obviously Osama bin Laden and his sidekick Zawahiri is still at large. We understand that. But we're looking, and we're listening, and we're working with allies like President Musharraf of Pakistan, President Karzai of Afghanistan to bring this -- to bring the head of al Qaeda to justice.

The second lesson learned is that unlike previous wars, these folks -- this kind of terrorist network that is ideologically bound needs safe haven. They need a place to hide. They need a symbiotic relationship with governments that will enable them to plot, plan and attack.

So early on in the conflict, I not only vowed that we would use our fierce determination to protect this country by staying on the offense, but that we would deny safe haven to these terrorists. And so I said, if you harbor a terrorist, you're equally as guilty as the terrorist. And one thing that I think is really important for our citizens to understand is that when the President says something, he better mean what he says. In order to be effective, in order to maintain credibility, words have got to mean something. You just can't say things in the job I'm in and not mean what you say.

And I meant what I said. And so we said to the Taliban, get rid of the Taliban. They chose not to. I made my first decision to send our kids into harm's way and liberate Afghanistan. The decision to liberate Afghanistan was based first and foremost on the need to enforce the doctrine that I thought was necessary to protect the American people. One of the benefits of sending our kids into harm's way was that we liberated 25 million people from the clutches of one of the most barbaric regimes known to the history of man.

Laura and I went over to that fledgling democracy. We went to see President Karzai. It was a remarkable experience. It's hard to describe. You know, I'm not -- I'm not such a good poet. Let me put it to you this way: My spirits were lifted to see people committed to democracy, recognizing that democracy stands in stark contrast to the life these people had to live under the Taliban.

The task now is to continue to fight off the Taliban and al Qaeda that would continue to try to disrupt the march of the new democracy, help this country survive and thrive and grow, and help the Afghan

citizens realize the dreams of men and women that they can live in a free and peaceful world. Remember, these folks have voted for a President and voted for a parliament. I'm proud of the progress we're making there. It's an historic achievement for our country and for our troops. And it was a necessary achievement to enforce the doctrines that we said were necessary to protect our people.

Another lesson -- this is an important lesson for the country. It's one that kind of sometimes can get obscured in the politics of Washington, but it's one that I'm confident when I tell you it's necessary for this country to adhere to. It's going to be necessary for me or whoever follows me. When we see a threat, we have got to take the threat seriously before it comes to hurt us.

You know, growing up in Midland, Texas, we all felt pretty secure as a kid, mainly because we thought oceans could protect us. Now in my case, we were really far away from oceans, too, but nevertheless, it's -- when you think about it, though, if you're a baby boomer, like me, you think about what it was like growing up, we knew there was a nuclear threat. Of course we had put forth an interesting sounding strategy called "mutually assured destruction," which provided an umbrella for security and safety.

But nevertheless, we never really felt anybody would invade us, did we? We never felt there would be another attack like Pearl Harbor on our lands. And yet September the 11th changed all that. More people died on September the 11th because of an attack by an enemy on our shore than died at Pearl Harbor. The biggest threat we face is when a terrorist network is able to acquire weapons even stronger than airplanes. If the terrorist network were ever to get weapons of mass destruction, one of their stated objectives, our country and the free world would face a serious threat.

I saw a threat in Iraq. Not only did I see a threat in Iraq, the previous administration saw a threat in Iraq. Not only did the previous -- which, by the way, passed a resolution in the United States Congress that said we ought to have a regime change in Iraq. Not only did the previous administration see a threat in Iraq, members of both political parties in both chambers during my time as President saw a threat in Iraq. And the reason we saw threats is because the intelligence said that Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction.

But it wasn't just U.S. intelligence that said that, there was -- the worldwide intelligence network felt like he had weapons of mass destruction. After all, when I took the case to the United Nations Security Council, the Security Council voted 15 to nothing to say loud and clear: disclose, disarm, or face serious consequences. That's not what the United States said alone. This is what France and Great Britain, China, Russia, and members of the Security Council said, because the world felt like Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, and after 9/11 it was abundantly clear that a state sponsor of terror, which is what he had been declared by previous administrations, and the idea of weapons of mass destruction, and the fact that he was at least, at the very minimum, a stated enemy of the United States of America posed a serious threat for our country.

My biggest job is to protect the American people. That became abundantly clear on September the 11th. It's important to pass good reform for education, it's important to support the community college system, it's important to work for, you know, a Medicare plan that meets the needs. My biggest job is to protect you -- at least that's how I see the job. Much of my decision-making, by the way, is based upon what happened on September the 11th. It had an effect on me, just like it had an effect on the country.

I've never forgotten that day. I've never forgotten the lessons learned, and so when we saw a threat, we got to take it seriously. Oceans could no longer protect us. The enemy was able to strike us and kill, and they were dangerous.

And before a President ever commits troops, you got to try diplomacy at all costs. I'm going to say to you what I said before, putting those kids in harm's way is a tough, difficult decision. And nobody should ever want to do it, because I understand fully the consequences of the decision. And so as I told you, I went to the diplomatic route. I was hoping that when the world spoke with that one voice at the United Nations Security Council, Saddam Hussein would see the reason of the free world. But he didn't.

I felt all along the decision was his to make. He said -- the world said, disclose, disarm. In the meantime, I want you to remember, he was deceiving inspectors. It's a logical question to ask: Why would somebody want to deceive inspectors? I also told you earlier that when America speaks, we got to mean what we said. I meant what we said when we embraced that resolution that said disclose, disarm, or face serious consequences. Words mean something in this world if you're trying to protect the American people.

I fully understand that the intelligence was wrong, and I'm just as disappointed as everybody else is. But what wasn't wrong was Saddam Hussein had invaded a country. He had used weapons of mass destruction. He had the capability of making weapons of mass destruction. He was firing at our pilots. He was a state sponsor of terror. Removing Saddam Hussein was the right thing for world peace and the security of our country. (Applause.)

Iraq is now the central front on the war on terror. The war on terror is broader than Iraq, but Iraq is the key battlefield right now. And the enemy has made it so.

The advance of democracy frightens the totalitarians that oppose us. Mr. Zarqawi, who is there in Iraq, is al Qaeda. He's not Iraqi, by the way. He is there representing the al Qaeda network, trying to stop the advance of democracy. It's an interesting question, isn't it, why would somebody want to stop democracy -- like, what's wrong with democracy; Mister, why are you afraid of it? Are you threatened by the fact that people get to speak and you don't get to dictate? Are you threatened by the fact that people should be able to worship the Almighty freely? What about democracy that bothers -- I think it's a legitimate question we all ought to be asking.

But nevertheless, he's tough, and he's mean, and he'll kill innocent people in order to shake our will. They have stated, clearly stated -- they being al Qaeda -- that it's just a matter of time for the United States to lose its nerve. They recognize they cannot beat us on the battlefield, they cannot militarily defeat the United States of America, but they can affect our conscience. And I can understand why. Nobody likes to see violence on the TV screens. Nobody wants to see little children blown up when a U.S. soldier is trying to give them candy. Nobody likes to see innocent women die at the hands of suicide bombers. It breaks our heart.

The United States of America is an incredibly compassionate nation. We value human life, whether it be here at home, or whether it be abroad. It's one of the really noble features of our country, I think.

Nobody likes to see that, and the enemy understands that, however. They know that if we lose our nerve and retreat from Iraq, they win.

We've got a strategy for victory in Iraq. It's important for you to know that victory will be achieved with a democracy that can sustain itself, a country that will be able to defend itself from those who will try to defeat democracy at home, a country that will be an ally in the war on terror, and a country that will deny al Qaeda and the enemies that face America the safe haven they want. Those are the four categories for victory. And they're clear, and our command structure and our diplomats in Iraq understand the definition of victory.

And we're moving that way, we're moving that way. We've got a plan to help rebuild Iraq. You know, when we first went in there -- by the way, every war plan or every plan is fine, until it meets the enemy. But you've got to adjust. You've got to be able to say on the ground, well, this is working, this isn't working. The enemy is not a -- they think differently, they make different decisions, they come up with different tactics to try to defeat us. And it's very important for us -- for me to say to our commanders and our diplomats, devise that strategy on the ground; keep adjusting, so that we achieve the victory that we want.

So when we first got into Iraq, we went with big rebuilding projects. You know, we're going to help them do this, and help them do that, big electricity projects. And the enemy blew them up. And so what we've done now is we've gone to a more rational strategy to provide money for local folks, including our military, to help smaller projects, but projects that are able to connect with the people on the ground. You know, jobs helps a lot, if you're trying to say, democracy is worth it.

Second aspect of our plan was to promote democracy. And I know four months in the way these news cycles work seems like a decade -- at least it does to me at times, you know? (Laughter.) Four months ago, 12 million people went to the polls. It was an amazing event, wasn't it, I mean, really think about it. You can project back to the amazement, surprise, exhilaration that happened when, given a chance to vote for the third time in one year, the Iraqi people having had suffered under the tyranny of Saddam Hussein said, I want to be free. That's what we want to be. That's what they said. Twelve million people, in the face of incredible threats and potential suicide bombers -- and ugly words coming out of those who fear democracy -- said, give me a chance. It was an amazing experience. It was a -- in my judgment, a moment that is historic.

Part of the task now is to say to the Iraqis -- leaders, the people said something, now you need to get -- you need to act. You need to get a unity government together. And that's what we're watching right now. It takes a while for people to overcome the effects of tyranny, and there's just a lot of politics happening in Iraq. It's a little different from what used to be the place. It's a little different from other countries in that part of the world where one person makes a decision, and everybody kind of either likes it or doesn't like it, but you keep your mouth shut if you don't like it.

Here you're watching people kind of edging for responsibility and working it, and we're very much involved. I know you know Condi went over there the other day, and her message was, let's get moving. The people want there to be a unity government. The people want there to be a democracy, and it requires leadership for people to stand up and take the lead. And so we're working with them to

get this unit government up and running.

And then there's the security side. You can't have a democracy unless the people are confident in the capacity of the state to protect them from those who want to stop the advance of democracy. The enemy for a while tried to shake our nerve. They can't shake my nerve. They just can't shake it. So long as I think I'm doing the right thing, and so long as we can win, I'm going to leave our kids there because it's necessary for the security of this country. If I didn't think that we could win, I'd pull them out. You just got to know that. I cannot sit with the mothers and fathers of our troops in harm's way and not feel like victory is necessary and victory will be achieved.

Part of my decision-making process about whether they're there is based upon whether or not the goal is necessary and attainable. It's necessary to protect this country. I'm going to talk about it a little later. And it is attainable. It's attainable because the Iraqis on the political side have said, you bet. Give us a chance. They wrote a constitution; they ratified the constitution. Twelve million went to the polls. That's a high voter turnout, by the way. On the security side, our goal, our mission is to let the Iraqis take the fight. And as I -- I've always been saying, they stand up, we stand down. That means, we train the Iraqis to take the fight to those who want to disrupt their country.

And we're making good progress on the military side. By the way, we had to change our tactics. When we first got there, we said, why don't we train us an army that will be able to protect from an outside threat. It turned out there wasn't much of an outside threat compared to the inside threat. And so now the training mission has adapted to the tactics of the enemy on the ground. We're embedding our guys with the Iraqi army. They're becoming more efficient. There's over 200,000 trained. And we're constantly monitoring the quality of effort. And as the quality of the forces improves, they take over more territory. The idea is to have the Iraqi face in front, making the -- helping the folks get the confidence in their government.

We lagged in police training. And so General Casey, as he -- who is our General on the ground there, told me, he said, you know, this is going to be the year of training the police so they can bring confidence to people.

The enemy shifted its tactics, as you know, and has tried to create a civil war. And they blew up the -- one of the holiest sites in Samara, trying to get the Sunnis to get after the Shia, and vice versa. It's been an objective for awhile. First it was go after coalition troops. They're still danger for our troops, don't get me wrong. But they really tried to incite a civil war. And what was interesting to watch is to watch the reaction for the -- by the government. The government, including many of the religious leaders, stood up and said, no, we don't want to go there; we're not interested in a civil war.

The Iraqi troops did a good job of getting between some mosques and crowds, and they got in between competing elements and stood their ground. And as I put it awhile ago, they said, the Iraqi people looked into the abyss and didn't like what they saw. And it's still troublesome, of course. There's still sectarian violence. You can't have a free state if you've got militia taking the law into their own hands.

Now remember, this is a society adjusting to being free after a tyranny. And Saddam Hussein's tactics

to keep the country in check was to pit one group of people against another and say, I'm the only stabilizing force for you. He was brutal on Shia, he destroyed with chemical weapons many Kurds, and he was tough on Sunnis, too. But he created a kind of -- this sense of rivalry.

And so you can understand why there's revenge after years of this kind of tension he created. Our job, and the job of rational Iraqi leaders is to prevent these sectarian reprisal attacks from going on. And it's tough work, but I want you to know, we understand the problem. More importantly, General Casey understands the problem.

We're adjusting our tactics to be able to help these Iraqis secure their country so that democracy can flourish. They want democracy. That's what they've said. The troops, time and time again, have shown that they're better trained than before. And we've got more work to do on that, I readily concede. There's a lot of debate and a lot of questions about what's happening, I understand that.

Again, I repeat to you, I know what violence does to people. First of all, I'm confident -- people are saying, I wonder if these people can ever get their act together and self-govern. The answer is, I'm confident they can if we don't lose our nerve.

One of the decision -- principles -- a principle on which I made decisions is this: I believe that freedom is universal. America was founded on the natural rights of men and women, which speaks to the universality of freedom. And if you believe in the universality of freedom, then you have confidence that if given a chance, people will seize that opportunity. No question the Iraqis need help after living under the thumb of a tyrant.

But freedom is embedded, I believe, in the souls of men and women all over the earth. You know, you don't demand freedom just -- more than Methodists demand freedom, let me put it to you that way. I'm a Methodist. (Laughter.) There's an interesting debate -- is it imposing one's values to encourage others to live in freedom? I argue the answer to that question is, absolutely not, if you believe in the universality of freedom.

And so while thrilled to see the vote, I was -- I wasn't shocked. People want to be free. I know you're thinking about, well, when's he going to get our troops out of there? There's a debate going on in Washington, D.C., which it should, and it's an important debate about our troop levels. Here's my answer to you: I'm not going to make decisions based upon polls and focus groups. I'm going to make my decisions based upon the recommendations of our generals on the ground. They're the ones who decide how to achieve the victory I just described. They're the ones who give me the information.

I remember coming up in the Vietnam War and it seemed like that there was a -- during the Vietnam War, there was a lot of politicization of the military decisions. That's not going to be the case under my administration. They say, well, does George Casey tell you the truth? You bet he tells me the truth. When I talk to him, which I do quite frequently, I've got all the confidence in the world in this fine General. He's a smart guy, he's on the ground, he's making incredible sacrifices for our country, and he -- if he says he needs more troops, he'll get them, and if he says he can live with fewer troops because the Iraqis are prepared to take the fight, that's the way it's going to be.

There are some in Washington, D.C. and around the country who are good folks, legitimate, decent folks, saying, pull the troops out. That would be a huge mistake. It would be a huge -- it would be a huge -- (applause) -- hold on a second -- it would be a huge mistake for these reasons: The enemy has said that they want us to leave Iraq in order to be able to regroup and attack us. If the American people -- the American government, not the people -- were to leave prematurely before victory is achieved, it would embolden the enemy.

Now, I recognize some don't see the enemy like I do. There's kind of a different view of the enemy. That's a good thing about America, people can have different points of view, you know? And people should be allowed to express them, which is great.

I see an enemy that is totalitarian in nature, that's clearly stated they want to attack us again, and they want safe haven from which to do so. That's why they're trying to stop democracy in Iraq. If we were to pull out our troops early, it would send a terrible signal to the Iraqis. Twelve million people said, I want to be free. And they need our help. We're helping the Iraqis achieve freedom. They watch these deals. They listen carefully to the debate in America. They need to watch -- by the way -- they need to watch this debate, which is good. It's what free societies do, they debate. But they're also listening very carefully about whether or not this country has got the will necessary to achieve the objective.

Thirdly, if we left before the mission was complete, what would it say to our troops and the families, particularly those who have lost a loved one? I spend -- let me say this about our military -- the volunteer army is a necessary part of our society. We need to maintain the volunteer army. It is a really -- we've got a magnificent group of men and women who serve our country. Do you realize most people who served, are serving today, volunteered after 9/11? They saw the stakes, and they said, I want to join the United States military. The retention rate is high, which means we've got people serving in uniform who not only volunteered and saw the stakes, but have been involved in this conflict and said, I'd like to stay in the military.

It is a -- the military is a vital part of securing this country in the war on terror. Now, if you don't think we're at war, then it probably doesn't matter that much. I not only think we're at war, I know we're at war. And it's going to require diligence and strength and a really -- and a military that's well paid, well housed, well trained, where morale is high. And pulling out before the mission is complete would send a terrible signal to the United States military.

I welcome the debate, but I just want people here to know, we're going to complete the mission. We'll achieve victory. And I want to say this to the Iraqi people: We want to help you achieve your dreams. And the United States of America will not be intimidated by thugs and assassins. (Applause.)

I got one more thing to say, then I -- I got one more thing to say. I know I'm getting a little windy. I want to talk to people about why it's important for us to succeed in Iraq, and Afghanistan, for that matter. I told you there's a short-term reason -- deny safe haven and help get allies in the war on terror to prevent this totalitarian movement from gaining a stronghold in places from which they can come hit us.

There's a longer term reason, as well, and that is, you defeat an ideology of darkness with an ideology

of hope and light. And freedom and liberty are part of an ideology of light. Our foreign policy in the past has been one that said, well, if the waters look calm in parts of the world, even though there may not be freedom, that's okay. The problem with that foreign policy is below the surface there was resentment and anger and despair, which provided a fertile ground for a totalitarian group of folks to spread their poisonous philosophy and recruit.

The way to defeat this notion of -- their notion of society is one that is open, that is democratic, that is based upon liberty. This doesn't have to be an American-style democracy. It won't be. Democracy has got to reflect the tradition and the history of the countries in which it takes hold. I understand that. And nobody in the Middle East should think that when the President talks about liberty and democracy, he's saying you got to look just like America, or act like America. Nobody is saying that.

I am saying, though, trust your people; give them a chance to participate in society. I believe a society is a whole society in which women are free and are given equal rights. I believe there's a whole society in which young girls are given a chance to go to school and become educated. I believe it's a whole society when government actually responds to people not dictates to people. That's what I believe. And I believe that it's the best way in the long run to defeat an ideology that feels the opposite way. And we've seen it happen in our history before. It's happened in some of your lifetimes.

One of the ways I like to describe what I'm trying to tell you is about my relationship with Prime Minister Koizumi of Japan. I say this all the time, as the press corps will tell you traveling with me -- when is he ever going to quit saying that? Well, it's the best example I can give you about what I'm trying to describe is happening today during these historic times. My dad fought the Japanese as an 18-year-old kid -- or 19 -- he went in at 18, I guess. But he was in combat. Many of your relatives fought the Japanese. It's hard to think back and kind of remember the bitterness that we had toward the Japanese. They attacked the United States of America and killed a lot of folks. And we want to war with them, and a lot of people died, and it was a bloody war.

After the war -- and by the way, it ended with an old doctrine of warfare, which is, destroy as many innocent people as you can to get the guilty to surrender. That's changed, by the way, with the precision nature of our military, and the way we're structured, and the way our troops think, is we now target the guilty and spare the innocent. That's another subject if you got a question. But anyway, today my friend in keeping the peace is Prime Minister of Japan.

Amazing, isn't it? Maybe you take it for granted. I don't. I think it's one of the really interesting parts of -- one of the interesting stories of history, that 60 years after we fought the Japanese, I can tell you that I work with Prime Minister Koizumi on a variety of issues. It's amazing, I think. I know 60 seems like a long time. If I were six or seven, it would seem like a long time. At 59, it seems like a long time. (Laughter.) Maybe when I'm 60, it will seem like a short time.

Anyway, so what happened? What was it that caused something to change, an enemy to become an ally? I believe it's because the Japanese adopted a Japanese-style democracy. And I appreciate the fact that one of my predecessors, Harry S. Truman, had the foresight to see the capacity of freedom, the universal right of people to change the world, to make it so that eventually an American President would be able to say, we're working together to keep the peace. They're no longer an enemy; they're a

friend. Democracies don't war.

Europe is whole and free and at peace for a reason. We lost thousands of troops on the continent of Africa -- on the continent of Europe since World War I. Thousands and thousands of young men and women lost their lives during that war. And today, there's peace. And the reason why is because democracies don't war with each other.

I believe that one day an American President will be talking about the world in which he is making decisions, or she is making decisions, and they'll look back and say, thank goodness a generation of Americans understood the universality of liberty and the fact that freedom can change troubled parts of the world into peaceful parts of the world.

Is it worth it in Iraq? You bet it is. It's worth it to protect ourselves in the short-run, but it's necessary and worth it to lay the foundation of peace for generations to come. And that's what's on my mind these days. (Applause.)

I'll be glad to answer questions. Yes, ma'am.

Q Mr. President, thank you so much for (inaudible). (Inaudible).

THE PRESIDENT: Good.

Q (Inaudible).

THE PRESIDENT: Good. You're welcome here. (Laughter.) This is not a political convention. (Laughter.)

Q But more importantly, I'm American, and my husband and I are proud parents of four children and five grandchildren, and I care very deeply, as you, about our future as a country and our place in the world.

THE PRESIDENT: Good.

Q I agree with you completely, that -- (inaudible) -- our borders, that we needed to defend our country against al Qaeda and was completely with you there. I agree that Saddam Hussein is a tyrant, as many are -- (inaudible) -- the world. But I am more concerned about the deficit that we are incurring in this country and the effect that that will have on my children and grandchildren, and our present. My colleagues here on the city council and I were just talking about how we can't afford after-school enrichment opportunities for the children of Charlotte because of cutbacks in the community development block grant. And I just --

THE PRESIDENT: That's a great question, thank you.

Q That we need to secure our borders, to protect our ports, and to invest in the people of Charlotte and

this country --

THE PRESIDENT: Good.

Q -- for a real national --

THE PRESIDENT: I got your question, thank you. It's a good question. She basically -- no seriously, it's a legitimate question. What are you doing about the deficit? You know? There are two types of deficits that I want to describe to you. One is the current account deficit. It's the deficit that -- that we're on plan to cut in half by 2009. There's an interesting debate in Washington about how do you deal with a current account deficit?

By the way, we -- and the area where we're able to affect the deficit the most, because through some of the programs you described called, discretionary spending. There's also discretionary sending and mandatory spending. Mandatory spending is a formula-driven spending that happens based upon conditions, not based upon necessarily legislation, although you can change mandatory spending through formula adjustment. Mandatory spending in Social Security, mandatory spending Medicare, mandatory spending Medicaid, programs like that, farm program is mandatory spending. Discretionary spending is some of the education programs you described. Discretionary spending is also military spending.

We -- I'm going to put this in a little larger context. I promise to answer your question. We were confronted with a series of hurdles to economic growth that we had to deal with in Washington. We had a stock market correction -- a quite significant stock market correction, and we had a recession early in '01. And then the enemy attacked us, which hurt our economy. Obviously, my decision to go to war. People don't -- you know, war is an unsettling thing. I fully understand that. Sometimes it's not conducive to risking capital during a time of war. We had a major natural disaster. All of this affected our economy.

I made the decision to cut taxes, as you know. It was a decision based upon the principle that if people had more money in their pocket, they're likely to spend it, save it, or invest it. And therefore, I felt like the best way to address these economic hurdles was to stimulate our economy through pro-growth economic policies, starting with a tax cut. And a tax cut, by the way, for everybody. Everybody who paid taxes should get a cut. It's a tax cut that helped our small businesses. I firmly believe by cutting taxes on dividends and capital gains it stimulated investment.

And our strategy has, I think, been proven by the numbers. We're going at 3.4 percent -- 3.5 percent last year. The national unemployment rate is at 4.8 percent, 5 million jobs in two-and-a-half years. I mean, I can go on -- housing is up. There's a lot of positive economic news. And no question, however, we've been running a deficit.

One reason we're running a deficit is because I'm going to make sure our troops have what it takes to do their job. In the harm's way -- when they're in harm's way, you've got to be able to say to their families that we're going to give them all they got. You know, we want to help them.

One of the interesting things about, for this war, is that we're saving a lot of lives through a health care system that is phenomenal and we're pulling these kids off the battlefield and sending them to Walter Reed or Bethesda as quickly as possible, sparing no expense to save lives. But no question it's been costly.

Katrina -- we're up to $100 billion on Katrina. I don't know if you've been over there. You know, it just breaks your heart to see the devastation done in the Gulf Coast of Mississippi and inside New Orleans. It's a gut-wrenching experience to see the devastation that went on, and the federal government has made a strong commitment to provide that money.

That's background for -- no question we have a current account deficit. I have submitted a budget that says we can cut it in half by 2009. Now, there is a debate in Washington. Some of them are saying, raise the taxes in order to balance the budget. In all due respect, that's not the way Washington works. Washington will raise the taxes and figure out new ways to spend the money. So my attitude is, let's leave the pro-growth economic policies in place, which by the way, yielded a $100 billion-plus more money than anticipated last year because a growing economy yields more tax revenues, and be tough on the spending.

And I understand it creates some of the conditions you said, and I appreciate you bringing those to my attention. We're now in another budget discussion in Washington. And I submitted another tough budget. Now, people said, why don't you veto the budgets? I'd like to explain that to you. So we sit down from the executive branch and negotiate -- we come up with a budget that we think is necessary to meet goals. The goal is to cut the current account deficit in half by 2009, and then we negotiate with the Congress. We say, here's the top line, here's what we want you to meet in order to meet the goals we think are necessary.

Thus far, they've hit the top line that we've suggested. Last year as the Councilwoman mentioned, the Mayor pro tem mentioned, that there are some cutbacks in CDBG money. It's all aimed at trying to get this deficit under control. And the -- and so Congress said, last year, you're right. Here's the top line. We made it.

And so the size of the pie was what we thought was necessary to achieve an objective. And so therefore, I'm confronted with a choice. I may not like the slices of the pie, but I like the size. And if I vetoed bills because of the slices but it met the size, what would happen during the next budget negotiations? They'd say, well, wait a minute, we hit your number, you vetoed the bills. How can we trust you in good faith?

The job of the President is to set a goal which is to reduce that deficit in half by 2009. And if people want me to be able to deal with slices of the pie, just give me the line-item veto. And I think that will help make sure that -- (Applause.)

Let me talk about another thing. I'm sorry -- this is a long answer to a very important question. I'm sorry I'm blowing on too much here, but the real deficit -- I'll get you in a minute -- the real deficit, another real deficit is the deficit inherent in Social Security and Medicare.

There is a massive amount of unfunded liability inherent in those two very important programs. And the reason why is, is that baby boomers like me are getting ready to retire. And there's a lot of us, and we're living longer than the program initially anticipated, and we've been promised greater benefits, and fewer people per retiree paying into the system. And the system is going to go broke, and a lot of people are watching whether or not the United States has the will to address this problem because if we don't, future Presidents and future Congresses are going to have to raise taxes significantly, reduce benefits significantly, or reduce other programs significantly. This is a significant problem facing a future generation of Americans.

As you know, I took the problem on last year. I might have been the only guy in Washington taking the problem on. (Laughter.) My theory was, go out and explain to the American people we got a problem. And the people now understand we got a problem, and the fundamental question is, how do you translate that to a program that Congress will act on.

And so my second strategy has been -- remember we're always adapting our tactics -- was to put together a bipartisan group, which we're in the process of doing, of members from both political parties from both chambers to come up with common ground so we can say to the American people, here is a bipartisan approach to these very serious, unfunded liabilities that face future generations of Americans. It's a short-term account. It's very important -- no question, Madam Councilperson. The long-term issue is equally, if not greater of importance, which is the unfunded liabilities inherent in Social Security and Medicare. I'm going to continue to take on the issue. It's a big issue, and I'm confident we can get it solved.

Okay, yes, sir.

Q (Inaudible.) I want to thank you for coming back to Charlotte again. We certainly enjoyed your wife here a few weeks ago. Okay, thank you. But I just wanted not to ask a question, but just to offer you a message of encouragement. I know many men and women in this room and around our region -- both Democrat and Republican -- continue to pray for wisdom and encouragement for you and strength during these times. So we just want to continue to encourage you.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Appreciate you. (Applause.)

I'd like to say one thing about religion -- religion and politics, if you don't mind. The United States of America must never lose sight of this beautiful principle: You can worship or not worship and you're equally American. You're equally American if you're a Christian, Jew or Muslim, atheist, agnostic. We must never lose sight of that. That's what distinguishes us from the Taliban.

Having said that, I cannot thank you all enough for the prayers. It means a lot to me and Laura. One of the most amazing aspects of the presidency is to meet total strangers, and they say, I pray for you. They don't say, I need a road or a bridge. (Laughter.) The Mayor might have said that. (Laughter.) Or a museum. They say, I pray for you, Mr. President. Thank you.

Let's see. Yes, ma'am.

Q -- I wouldn't get a chance to ask you questions.

THE PRESIDENT: Why is that?

Q Just because there would be -- you might not choose me. (Laughter.) Thank you very much.

THE PRESIDENT: Don't bet against yourself is lesson one.

Q Right. And I wanted to say to you, Mr. President, that on the war on terror, Social Security, the tax cuts, Dubai Ports, immigration, you have shown immense political courage. And I really think that you will be vindicated on all of those positions, as Ronald Reagan was, for example. And also I wanted to know what else would it take for me to get my picture taken with you? (Laughter and applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: My attitude is, about this job, is just do my job. Say what you think is right. There's an interesting sense about whether this poll or that poll, I'm just going to tell you something about the presidency. You cannot make decisions based upon polls. You've got to stand -- I'm not trying to elicit applause here, I'm just trying to share with you what it's like, as best I can, to be your President, at least why I do what I do.

And I am -- I'm the kind of fellow that -- it's like the Social Security issue. You know, they say, well, you shouldn't have brought it up, you know. I can't live with myself if I see a problem and not willing to address it. I want, after eight years, to be able to walk out of that office and say, I did what I thought was right.

Now, you talk -- an interesting thing is, I'm reading a lot of history these days, and it's -- I've got some books to recommend, if you like them, you know. (Laughter.) In contrary to what some of them think back there, it's not big print and pictures, either. (Laughter and applause.) Yes. Yes, I got you, thank you. (Laughter.)

I read three books on George Washington. I think it's really interesting, isn't it? Historians are still analyzing the first President of the United States. And history is -- sometimes history doesn't record the immediate effects of a presidency. And you just do what you think is right, and you don't have to -- you can't worry about it, you know. If they're still writing about Washington, you know, who knows how long I will be gone before they're writing about me in a way where there's enough time between the day -- the presidency -- and an objective look of what takes place.

You heard me quoting Harry Truman. I bet you when Harry Truman made the decision to help the Japanese become a democracy, there was some editorialization basically saying, how dare you work with an enemy. You know, I bet there was some of that. But there was a lot of skepticism, and I can understand that, you know? I can understand why people are skeptical about whether or not a democracy can take hold in a part of the world like the Middle East. My only point to you, it's necessary for the peace. It has worked in the past, and it's necessary. And we cannot lose confidence in -- in these universal values.

Let's see here, yes. Yes. No, wait a minute. You're second. Excuse me. (Laughter.) I beg your pardon.

Q (Inaudible.)

THE PRESIDENT: You have people involved. Thank you for that. That's a good question. She asked, what can young people do to get involved? First of all, the fact that you asked a question is an encouraging sign.

I like to tell people that the true strength of America is the hearts and souls of our people. You know, our military might is strong; our wallets are fatter than anybody else's in the world on an individual per capita basis. But the true strength of our country is the fact that neighbors love neighbors.

De Tocqueville saw this when he came to the United States in 1830s. He was a traveler, and he came and said, I'm coming to the land of the rugged individualist. And he discovered something interesting way back in 1832, I think it was, when he wrote his book. He discovered that Americans have a penchant, the desire to form voluntary associations to help a neighbor. And it's that spirit of helping a neighbor that Presidents should foster and encourage, because it really is the strength of the United States of America.

When you really think about the community of Charlotte, in spite of the fact that the federal government has got influence, or the City Council has got influence, there are thousands of your fellow citizens teaching a child to read. And it doesn't require one law. There are people feeding the hungry. I bet you've got some of the great food pantry programs in the United States of America here. There are people providing shelter for the homeless. There are thousands of acts of kindness. The Boy Scout troops are active, I bet. The Girl Scouts. These are -- the little league programs, you know. The basketball programs. They -- there's thousands of acts of kindness taking place on a daily basis.

To answer your question, involvement can mean a lot of things. It can mean serving in the military, it can mean teaching a child to read, it can mean getting your classmates to volunteer to help feed the hungry. There's thousands of ways to contribute, and the fact that we have millions of Americans doing that is really a remarkable aspect of our country.

One of the principles that has guided me is, to whom much is given, much is required. That's why I'm very proud of our nation's effort to help lead the effort to solve the HIV/AIDS issue, particularly on the continent of Africa. We're an abundant nation. We're a blessed people in many ways, and yet, there's a pandemic raging across the continent of Africa that's literally having the potential affect of wiping out a generation of people. And the stories are heartbreaking and they're devastating to a civilization in many places. And yet, our nation has made the commitment to spend $15 billion over a five-year period of time to help provide anti-retroviral drugs to help provide prevention, to help the orphans who've been left alone. The program is being administered by the U.S. government.

And one aspect -- there's a Global Fund, as well. Another aspect -- but the people on the ground, the foot soldiers, many are from the faith community who have said, I want to help; what can I do to help a neighbor? The neighbor could be right around the corner, or the neighbor could be on the continent of Africa, in this case. We are a generous, compassionate people, and it's our true strength.

Let's see here. Yes, sir. Yes, please.

Q Yes, sir. Actually, I'm bringing a statement to you for a friend. Sahara Bozan (phonetic) is a young Iraqi woman who just came to America last year. She grew up under Saddam, and she actually worked for the U.S. forces during the war as an interpreter. I talked to her this week. She wanted to make sure that she knew -- that you knew that her family that's still there is grateful, that she thinks that even though there may be terrorists still going on, that they are safer now than they ever were before. And her goal is to one day meet you to thank you in person, because you have changed their lives. Even though we might not see that in the press, their lives are much better today than they were three, four years ago.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, sir.

Q So she wanted to thank you. (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Say, wait a minute, I -- I will keep my word here. Oh there you are. Yes, sorry. You thought I forgot, didn't you? I beg your pardon, I did forget. (Laughter.) You know how guys near 60, they begin to kind of -- (Laughter.)

Q (Inaudible.)

THE PRESIDENT: A civics teacher, great, thank you. Thank you for teaching.

Q (Inaudible.)

THE PRESIDENT: No, I appreciate -- that's a very good question. First of all, thank you for teaching. By the way -- (Applause.) As you grow up, the lady behind you, the girl behind you, as you grow up, one way to contribute is to teach, by the way.

The global war on terror requires a global response, and inherent in this woman's question was: What are you doing to make sure that others join the United States, recognizing that we cannot do this alone? And I appreciate the question a lot.

There is a lot of cooperation going on now. One of the great myths is that the United States is alone in the war on terror. Take, for example, Afghanistan. No question we've got Special Forces there. No question we've got a viable element of our military there to fight off al Qaeda or Taliban as they either sneak across the border or come from different provinces to try to do harm, but NATO is very actively involved there, as well.

The NATO presence is in the lead in many of the provinces. There's what's called provincial reconstruction teams. It's kind of along the lines that I talked about earlier about localizing the reconstruction efforts on a provincial basis. This is what's happening in Afghanistan, and there's reconstruction -- provincial reconstruction teams run by different countries. Germany has got a

presence there. France has had -- has presence in Afghanistan. In other words, there is a global network there.

In Iraq, as well, there's a lot of coalition forces, some small, some large. Great Britain, of course, is large. The Japanese had a thousand troops there. It's an amazing commitment by Prime Minister Koizumi when you think about the aftermath of World War II. The South Koreans have had a significant force there. The Poles have had a significant force there. There's a big international presence there. Many of the -- and the NATO mission, by the way, is present in Iraq, as well, all aimed at helping train. They're very much involved in the training mission to give the Iraqi troops the skills necessary to do their jobs.

The global war on terror is fought on more fronts than just the military front. For example, one of the really important parts of this war on terror is to share intelligence, is to be able to say, if you hear somebody or see somebody coming that you tell a counterpart in another agency -- another intelligence service. And so we spend a lot of time, John Negroponte, for example, or Porter Goss spends a lot of time with their counterparts constantly figuring out how best to share information.

Again, in the old war, people could measure movement by the enemy from -- by watching ships and tanks move across plains. Now we're dealing with people that are kind of moving around stealthily. And we've got to be in a position where we can share that intelligence.

The third aspect of the global war on terror is to cut off their money. It turns out terrorists need money -- just like the federal government spends money. And it's a -- so we're -- our Secretary of Treasury, John Snow, and others are constantly working to make sure that hawalas, for example, which are kind of a money transmitting entity, doesn't -- includes terrorist financing. Or we worked with the Saudi government to make it clear that the financing of terrorist activities are not in our interest, obviously, or their interest.

By the way, the Saudi government has been very active in the war on terror. They've got a list of al Qaeda potential killers, and they're bringing them to justice. Pakistan has been a strong ally in the war on terror. You might remember that President Musharraf was one of three countries -- or that Pakistan under President Musharraf was one of three countries that had recognized the Taliban. And so needless to say after September the 11th, he was -- made a choice. Colin Powell did a wonderful job of talking to President Musharraf in a very respectful and dignified way, and basically said, who are you with? And he has been an ally in the war on terror.

The interesting thing about President Musharraf is the enemy has tried to kill him four times. There have been four assassination attempts on him by al Qaeda, which causes him to be a strong ally in the war on terror. (Laughter.)

And so it's a great question. I'm constantly working to remind people about the stakes. I knew one of the real dangers after 9/11 was that people would tend to forget the lessons learned. And that's normal. And frankly, if you're the President of the United States, you want normalcy. You want people to go back to their life as quickly as possible.

And so it's -- my job is to travel the country, like I'm doing a lot of, and saying, here are the stakes. Go ahead and live your life, and risk capital and raise your families, let us worry about it. And it's such a different kind of war that we're constantly having to work with our allies, as well, to remind them about the stakes.

The enemy has reminded them about the stakes. Remember that ours isn't the only country that's been attacked. There were attacks in Madrid, there were attacks in London, attacks in Egypt, there's been a series of attacks around the world -- Jordan. They go up -- al Qaeda goes in and blows up a wedding. These are cold-blooded killers now. These are people that will stop at nothing to achieve their objectives.

And so -- no, that's a great question. And the coalition is -- it's been a large coalition, and we're constantly working it. Some countries feel comfortable about helping in Afghanistan, some -- that same country may not feel comfortable about Iraq. But either way, we're talking about this war on terror on a regular basis.

Yes. Sir.

Q (Inaudible).

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, yes. Squeaky wheel? Okay, hold on. (Laughter.) It'll work.

Q Mr. President, my name is --

THE PRESIDENT: I went with the tall guy first. (Laughter.)

Q It's an honor to stand here in front of you and ask you this question. You talked a little bit about your decision-making ability, and you've been steadfast as it relates to the global war on terror, which I think is commendable. Another thing I look for in a leader is their ability to look in hindsight and their ability to be -- a degree of humility. And maybe wondering what could have been done differently? I wonder if you look back and go, maybe I should have done this differently? I'd just be curious to hear that.

THE PRESIDENT: I appreciate that. I'm constantly looking back to see if things could be done differently or better. A classic example -- first of all, I meant what I said on the strategic objective in Iraq. I said in the '04 campaign, I'm going to say it to you again: Knowing what I know today, I'd have made the same decision.

The tactics of going in -- one of the interesting questions -- you know, for example, the training of troops. We started training a military from ground one, Iraqi military, as if there was going to be a threat from outside its borders, which, in retrospect, we could have done better. After all, the threat was not from outside the borders. The threat was inside the borders as a result of Zarqawi coming in -- coming in the country.

The police training has now begun in earnest in '06. The fundamental question is, could we have sped

that up, could we have done a better job. The strategy, I'm convinced, is right, which is to give the Iraqis the opportunity to defend themselves. The question is, are the tactics in order to achieve that, could we have done a quicker job, and expedited the idea of having the Iraqis standing up and us standing down.

I mentioned the reconstruction projects. Again, these are all necessary to look back to make sure that as we head out into the future, that we're able to adjust quicker and better. And I spent a lot of time reviewing decisions made.

There's a -- you know, there's a debate in Washington about the strategic objective, however. That's different from the tactics on the ground. I strongly believe what we're doing is the right thing. If I didn't believe it -- I'm going to repeat what I said before -- I'd pull the troops out, nor if I believed we could win [sic], I would pull the troops out.

There is a -- the military are constantly taking a real-time analysis based upon previous decisions and what they anticipate the needs to be. And so they themselves are constantly evaluating what could have been done differently.

Obviously, one classic case that hurt us that I wish were done differently was Abu Ghraib, the prison. What took place there and the pictures there just represented everything we didn't stand for. And it hurt us. It hurt us in the international arena, particularly in the Muslim world, where they said, look -- it gave the enemy a fantastic opportunity to use it for propaganda reasons. Look at the United States of America. Look what they're doing to these people. They're disgracing -- they don't believe in the dignity of each person, and, in fact, we do. I wish that could be done over. It was a disgraceful experience. However, I'm proud to report that the people who made that decision are being brought to justice, and there was a full investigation over why something like that could have happened.

And so, yes, I do. Look, I fully understand there is -- I guess, my reputation is, he sticks to his guns and -- it's a very legitimate question, do you ever kind of understand that maybe that you've got to be somewhat flexible?

I'm not flexible in my principles. I think if you're flexible in your principles, you end up not making sound decision. But I do agree with your question that a President has got to be capable of looking back and learning from how things could have been done differently. Great question. Thank you.

Okay, squeaky wheels. There's three of you up there. Is this like a chorus? (Laughter.) Would you please decide among yourselves?

Q I've got the mike.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, yes, very good. (Laughter and applause.) Good move.

Q You never stop talking about freedom, and I appreciate that. But while I listen to you talk about freedom, I see you assert your right to tap my telephone, to arrest me and hold me without charges, to

try to preclude me from breathing clean air and drinking clean water and eating safe food. If I were a woman, you'd like to restrict my opportunity to make a choice and decision about whether I can abort a pregnancy on my own behalf. You are --

THE PRESIDENT: I'm not your favorite guy. Go ahead. (Laughter and applause.) Go on, what's your question?

Q Okay, I don't have a question. What I wanted to say to you is that I -- in my lifetime, I have never felt more ashamed of, nor more frightened by my leadership in Washington, including the presidency, by the Senate, and --

AUDIENCE MEMBERS: Booo!

THE PRESIDENT: No, wait a sec -- let him speak.

Q And I would hope -- I feel like despite your rhetoric, that compassion and common sense have been left far behind during your administration, and I would hope from time to time that you have the humility and the grace to be ashamed of yourself inside yourself. And I also want to say I really appreciate the courtesy of allowing me to speak what I'm saying to you right now. That is part of what this country is about.

THE PRESIDENT: It is, yes. (Applause.)

Q And I know that this doesn't come welcome to most of the people in this room, but I do appreciate that.

THE PRESIDENT: Appreciate --

Q I don't have a question, but I just wanted to make that comment to you.

THE PRESIDENT: I appreciate it, thank you. Let me --

Q Can I ask a question?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm going to start off with what you first said, if you don't mind, you said that I tap your phones -- I think that's what you said. You tapped your phone -- I tapped your phones. Yes. No, that's right. Yes, no, let me finish.

I'd like to describe that decision I made about protecting this country. You can come to whatever conclusion you want. The conclusion is I'm not going to apologize for what I did on the terrorist surveillance program, and I'll tell you why. We were accused in Washington, D.C. of not connecting the dots, that we didn't do everything we could to protect you or others from the attack. And so I called in the people responsible for helping to protect the American people and the homeland. I said, is there anything more we could do.

And there -- out of this national -- NSA came the recommendation that it would make sense for us to listen to a call outside the country, inside the country from al Qaeda or suspected al Qaeda in order to have real-time information from which to possibly prevent an attack. I thought that made sense, so long as it was constitutional. Now, you may not agree with the constitutional assessment given to me by lawyers -- and we've got plenty of them in Washington -- but they made this assessment that it was constitutional for me to make that decision.

I then, sir, took that decision to members of the United States Congress from both political parties and briefed them on the decision that was made in order to protect the American people. And so members of both parties, both chambers, were fully aware of a program intended to know whether or not al Qaeda was calling in or calling out of the country. It seems like -- to make sense, if we're at war, we ought to be using tools necessary within the Constitution, on a very limited basis, a program that's reviewed constantly to protect us.

Now, you and I have a different -- of agreement on what is needed to be protected. But you said, would I apologize for that? The answer -- answer is, absolutely not. (Applause.)

Q Mr. President, I was raised on a ranch in New Mexico. And my heroes have always been cowboys.

THE PRESIDENT: There you go. Thank you, yes. (Laughter.) I'm not sure I qualify as a cowboy. (Laughter.)

Q Thinking about our children's children, if the all-powerful granter of the presidential request were to visit you this evening and give you one of these three, of ongoing economic growth and security for America, ridding the world of the security threat now posed by North Korea and Iran, or establishing peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, which one --

THE PRESIDENT: Whew. (Laughter.) Back to back, you know? (Laughter.) I don't -- that's not the way life works. You can do more than one thing at one time. We can achieve peace with the -- we can win this war on terror if we're steadfast and strong. It's not going to happen on my watch. It's going to take awhile. We can spread liberty and freedom to create peace. And we can work on the Palestinian-Israeli issue at the same time. I am the first President to have articulated two states living side-by-side in peace.

And I'm also a President who believed that the Palestinians needed to have elections. There's an interesting debate in Washington, is do you wait for the conditions to be perfect before elections, that the institutions be in place before there are elections, or do you have elections as a step toward a civil society and a democratic society? As you know, I've taken the latter rather than the former, and encouraged the Palestinian elections.

And what was interesting about those elections is that -- and since then, by the way, the Israelis have had elections. The Palestinian elections -- let me just step back. I think the Palestinians have been a long-suffering people that deserve better government. The former leadership turned out to be corrupt, like, stole money. And as a result of his leadership, we never got very close to peace. There wasn't a

lasting -- there weren't lasting institutions in place. I believe democracies don't war.

And so the election was really an interesting one, I think, recently. Guess what the election -- was based on? Corruption. This is the Palestinian elections. Anti-corruption campaigns; vote for me, we're not going to steal your money; vote for me, we'll help educate your kids and provide health care. The dilemma we're in -- it's not a dilemma. I made the decision that if you believe in two states living side-by-side in peace, then one of the parties in the state -- one of the parties cannot declare their intentions to destroy the other party. That's not peaceful. That is war-like.

And so our posture at this point in time is to say to the Palestinians, Hamas, get rid of it; get rid of that platform. It's not a peaceful platform. It's a war-like platform. We want there to be two states side-by-side in peace.

We've also said, we'll help the people, but not the government. You know, somebody said, well, you support elections. I said, yes, I do. I don't necessarily have to like who wins. But I do think it was a necessary part of the evolution of the state to have the Palestinian people be able to say, we're sick of it. We're sick of the status quo. We want something differently. We want a government that's honest, and we want a government that listens to our demands. I thought it was a positive development. And now, I would strongly urge the Hamas government to change their tune and their rhetoric about Israel and advocate the peace and work toward a civil society that will yield to lasting peace.

Again, this is an issue where I'm -- progress is being made, but it requires a steadfast support of our belief that democracies will yield to peace.

I've got to go. I appreciate you. Yes, one last question. Yes, ma'am, I promised you. I'm sorry.

Q Thank you. Thank you, very much, Mr. President. I am Wihelmenia Remert (phonetic). I serve as Vice Chair of the Board of County Commission here in Mecklenburg County. I'm joined by my colleague, Commissioner Dumont Clarke, and we welcome you to Mecklenburg County.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

Q I defer my own question to ask you a question of one of my students at Winthrop University, where I'm a professor of social work, asked me to bring to your attention, and that is, what can you, Mr. President, and what will you do to help control the rising cost of fuel which is really affecting the ability of many students to travel, and the rest of us -- not just students -- to travel back and forth to work and to school? Thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: I appreciate that. (Applause.) I wish I could wave a wand and say, we need more gasoline relative to demand. I don't have the capacity to control the market. I do have the capacity to start leading this country away from dependence on oil. And I believe that we need to promote -- vigorously promote alternative sources of energy, starting with ethanol, which could help the farmers around here, by the way. There's a lot of ethanol -- ethanol basically right now is produced from corn. In the Midwest, a lot of people are using more ethanol -- and to promote technologies such as plug-in hybrid batteries. We're close to some significant breakthroughs. By the way, this is where Republicans

and Democrats are working together in Washington, D.C. to provide the funding necessary for technology to help lead us away from dependency on oil.

And so this isn't going to help your person tomorrow -- I readily concede. But it is going to -- it's going to, in the relatively near future, be able to enable people to plug their car in and drive the first 40 miles on battery, as opposed to using gasoline.

And so there is a real need -- that's why I put this in the State of the Union -- a real need for us to diversify away from fossil fuels, not only to protect the environment, Mister, but also for national and economic security reasons. And the -- we're making progress.

I was able to make a decision right after Katrina that helped deal with the -- what could have been a -- even stronger rise in the price of gasoline. I was able to suspend EPA rules because of the natural disaster that took place. And by suspending the blended rules that can create disruption as these -- as the seasonal change, there's a disruption in supply, by suspending those rules, it enabled us to import more European gasoline. And that, in turn, provided stability in the marketplace. And so we didn't have significant spikes.

I fully understand the effects of gasoline price raises on people who are working. It's like a tax. Every time it goes up at the pump, people are like paying a tax. And the long-term solution is to get off oil. And we are aggressively doing so.

Thanks for your time. God bless. (Applause.)

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