THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESIDENT
GEORGE W. BUSH

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The East Room

In Focus: Global Diplomacy

VIDEO Multimedia

President's Remarks

view

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PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you all. Good evening. I want to thank Prime Minister Tony Blair for coming to Washington to discuss his recent visit to Iraq. The Prime Minister met with key leaders of the new Iraqi government that represents the will of the Iraqi people and reflects their nation's diversity. As Prime Minister Blair will tell you, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki outlined an aggressive agenda to bring security to the Iraqi people, to improve electricity and other essential services, and to pursue a strategy for national reconciliation.

The agenda that Prime Minister Maliki has outlined demonstrates that Iraq's new government understands its duty to deliver real improvements in the daily lives of the Iraqi people. The formation of a new government represents a new beginning for Iraq and a new beginning for the relationship between Iraq and our coalition. The United States and Great Britain will work together to help this new democracy succeed. We'll take advantage of this moment of opportunity and work with Iraq's new government to strengthen its young democracy and achieve victory over our common enemies.

As we celebrate this historic moment, it's important to recall how we got there, and take stock on how far we've come over the last three years. The violence and bloodshed in Iraq has been difficult for the civilized world to comprehend. The United States and Great Britain have lost some of our finest men and women in combat. The car bombings and suicide attacks and other terrorist acts have also inflicted great suffering on the Iraqi people. And Iraqis have increasingly become the principal victims of terror and sectarian reprisal.

Yet, in the face of this ongoing violence, each time the Iraqi people voiced their opinion, they chose freedom. In three different elections, millions of Iraqis turned out to the polls and cast their ballots.

Because of their courage, the Iraqis now have a government of their choosing, elected under the most modern and democratic constitution in the Arab world. The birth of a free and democratic Iraq was made possible by the removal of a cruel dictator.

The decision to remove Saddam Hussein from power was controversial. We did not find the weapons of mass destruction that we all believed were there -- and that's raised questions about whether the sacrifice in Iraq has been worth it. Despite setbacks and missteps, I strongly believe we did and are doing the right thing. Saddam Hussein was a menace to his people; he was a state sponsor of terror; he invaded his neighbors. Investigations proved he was systematically gaming the oil-for-food program in an effort to undermine sanctions, with the intent of restarting his weapons programs once the sanctions collapsed and the world looked away.

If Saddam Hussein were in power today, his regime would be richer, more dangerous and a bigger threat to the region and the civilized world. The decision to remove Saddam Hussein was right.

But not everything since liberation has turned out as the way we had expected or hoped. We've learned from our mistakes, adjusted our methods, and have built on our successes. From changing the way we train the Iraqi security forces to rethinking the way we do reconstruction, our commanders and our diplomats in Iraq are constantly adapting to the realities on the ground. We've adapted our tactics, yet the heart of our strategy remains the same: to support the emergence of a free Iraq that can govern itself, sustain itself, and defend itself.

All our efforts over the past three years have been aimed towards this goal. This past weekend, the world watched as Iraqis stood up a free and democratic government in the heart of the Middle East. With our help, Iraq will be a powerful force for good in a troubled region, and a steadfast ally in the war on terror.

With the emergence of this government, something fundamental changed in Iraq last weekend. While we can expect more violence in the days and weeks ahead, the terrorists are now fighting a free and constitutional government. They're at war with the people of Iraq, and the Iraqi people are determined to defeat this enemy, and so are Iraq's new leaders, and so are the United States and Great Britain.

It is vital that Iraq's new government seize this opportunity to heal old wounds and set aside sectarian differences and move forward as one nation. As Prime Minister Maliki has made his priorities clear, we have learned they're the right priorities. He's said he will focus on improving the security situation in Baghdad and other parts of the country. He has declared he will use maximum force to defeat the terrorists. He's vowed to eliminate illegal militias and armed gangs. He wants to accelerate the training of the Iraqi security forces so they can take responsibility from coalition forces for security throughout Iraq. He wants to improve health care and housing and jobs, so the benefits of a free society will reach every Iraqi citizen.

Our coalition will seize this moment, as well. I look forward for continued in-depth discussions with Tony Blair, so we can develop the best approach in helping the new Iraqi government achieve its objectives. The new government of Iraq will have the full support of our two countries and our coalition, and we will work to engage other nations around the world to ensure that constitutional democracy in Iraq succeeds and the terrorists are defeated.

Mr. Prime Minister.

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: Thank you, Mr. President, and can I say what a pleasure it is to be with you again at the White House. And thank you for your welcome.

As everyone knows, I was in Iraq earlier in this week, in Baghdad. And I was able to discuss with the new leaders of Iraq firsthand their experience and their hopes and expectations for the future. And I came away thinking that the challenge is still immense, but I also came away more certain than ever that we should rise to it. And though it is, at times, daunting, it is also utterly inspiring to see people from all the different parts of the community in Iraq -- the Sunni, the Shia, the Kurds -- sitting down together, all of them democratic leaders, democratically elected by their people; elected for a four-year term; elected and choosing to come together as a government of national unity, and completely determined to run their country in a different way for the future.

Anybody who studies the program of the Iraqi government can't fail to see the similarities with the type of program that any of us would want to see for our countries. And what is remarkable about it is that they put the emphasis, of course, on the issues to do with economic recovery and reconstruction and all the problems of infrastructure that they have in their country, but they also very clearly commit themselves to reconciliation between the different parts of the country, to the fight against sectarianism, and to the defeat of terrorism.

And I think what is important now is to say that after three years, which have been very, very difficult indeed, and when at times it looked impossible for the democratic process to work, I think after these three years and the democratic process working and producing this government, then it is our duty, but it is also the duty of the whole of the international community, to get behind this government and support it, because the other thing that came across to me very strongly from talking to them was that the reason there is bloodshed and violence in Iraq is that the very forces that we are confronting everywhere, including in our own countries, who want to destroy our way of life, also want to destroy their hope of having the same type of life. In other words, the very forces that are creating this violence and bloodshed and terrorism in Iraq are those that are doing it in order to destroy the hope of that country and its people to achieve democracy, the rule of law and liberty.

And I think there is a pattern here for us in the international community. I know the decision to remove Saddam was deeply divisive for the international community, and deeply controversial. And there's no point in rehearsing those arguments over and over again. But whatever people's views about the wisdom of that decision, now that there is a democratic government in Iraq, elected by its people, and now they are confronted with those whose mission it is to destroy the hope of democracy, then our sense of mission should be equal to that and we should be determined to help them defeat this terrorism and violence.

And I believe very, very strongly, indeed -- even more so having talked to the leaders there and now coming back and examining our own situation and how we help -- I'm more than ever convinced that what is important for them in Iraq is to know that we will stand firm with them in defeating these forces of reaction.

I believe the same, incidentally, is true of the struggle in Afghanistan, where, again, exactly the same forces of terrorism and reaction want to defeat the hopes of people for progress. I would also like to think -- and this is something the President and I were discussing earlier, we will carry on discussing over tonight and tomorrow -- and that is the importance of trying to unite the international community behind an agenda that means, for example, action on global poverty in Africa, and issues like Sudan; it means a good outcome to the world trade round, which is vital for the whole of the civilized world, vital for developing countries, but also vital for countries such as ourselves, for progress in the Middle East, and for ensuring that the global values that people are actually struggling for today in Iraq are global values we take everywhere and fight for everywhere that we can in our world today.

So I would like to pay tribute also to the work that our forces do there. I think both our countries can be immensely proud of their heroism and their commitment and their dedication.

But one very interesting thing happened to me when I was there and talking to some of our armed forces, and talking, also, to the Iraqi soldiers that were working alongside them, and that is, for all the differences in culture and background and nationality, both of them were working together in a common cause, and that was to help a country that was once a brutalized dictatorship, become a country that enjoys the same rights and the same freedoms that we take for granted here, and in the United Kingdom. And for all the hardship and the challenge of the past few years, I still think that is a cause worth standing up for.

Thank you, Mr. President.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Terry.

Q Mr. President, Pentagon officials have talked about prospects for reducing American forces in Iraq to about 100,000 by year's end. Does the formation of a unity government in Iraq put you on a sound footing to achieve that number?

And Mr. Prime Minister, is it realistic to think that Iraqi forces will be able to take control of all Iraq by the end of next year as Mr. Malaki suggests?

PRESIDENT BUSH: First of all, we're going to work with our partners in Iraq, the new government, to determine the best way forward in achieving an objective, which is an Iraq that can govern itself and sustain itself and defend itself.

I have said to the American people, as the Iraqis stand up, we'll stand down. But I've also said that our commanders on the ground will make that decision. And I have -- we'll talk to General Casey once he is -- conferred with the new government of Iraq. They don't have a defense minister yet; they're in the process of getting a defense minister. So it probably makes a lot of sense for our commander on the ground to wait until their defense structure is set up before we discuss with them, and he with me, the force levels necessary to achieve our objective.

Q So the 100,000 --

PRESIDENT BUSH: That's some speculation in the press that I -- they haven't talked to me about. And as the Commander-in-Chief, they eventually will talk to me about it. But the American people need to know that we'll keep the force level there necessary to win. And it's important for the American people to know that politics isn't going to make the decision as to the size of our force level. The conditions on the ground will make the decision. And part of the conditions on the ground, Terry, is a new government, and we believe the new government is going to make a big difference in the lives of the Iraqi people.

I told you earlier that when you attack an Iraqi now, you're at war with an Iraqi government that's constitutionally elected. And that's a different attitude from the way it's been in the past.

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: I think it's possible for the Iraqi security forces to take control progressively of their country. That's exactly the strategy we've outlined at the beginning. And I think it's possible to happen in the way that Prime Minister Maliki said. For that to happen, obviously, the first thing that we need is a strong government in Baghdad that is prepared to enforce its writ throughout the country. My very strong feeling, having talked to the leaders there, is that they intend theirs to be such a government.

Secondly, what they intend is to come down very hard on those people who want to create the circumstances where it's difficult for the Iraqi forces to be in control. And the truth of the matter is there is no excuse now for anyone to engage in violence in Iraq. I mean, if people's worry is to do with being excluded from the political process, everybody has got their place in the political process today. And, obviously, there are still issues to do with the capability of the Iraqi forces, but all the time they are building up, both in number and in capability, and we've got to support that all the way through.

But I'll tell you one interesting thing from talking to all the different groups -- because sometimes, certainly in our country, the impression is given that the Iraqi people wish that we were gone from Iraq and weren't there any longer in support of the Iraqi government or the Iraqi forces. Not a single one of the people I talked to, not one of the political leaders, from whatever part of the spectrum in Iraq that I talked to -- and these are all people from all the different communities elected by their people -- not one of them wanted us to pull out precipitately. All of them wanted us to stick with it and see the job done.

Now, of course, they want to take back control of their own country fully -- and we want them to do that. But when Prime Minister Maliki talked about an objective timetable, what he meant was a timetable governed by conditions on the ground. And we will be working with them now in the coming period of time to see how we can put that framework together. But they have a very, very clear sense of what they want the multinational force to do. They want us there in support until they've got the capability, and then they want us to leave and them to take full charge of their country. And I believe that can happen.

Q One gets a clear sense of your mutual relief that a government has now been formed, an elected government has been formed in Iraq. But, nonetheless, the current Secretary General of the United Nations has said that he believes that the invasion of Iraq was probably illegal. When you look at your legacy and you look ahead to the reforms in the United Nations you want to see, are you really saying that what you'd actually like to see is a United Nations which could take preemptive action legally?

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: I think what we need to do is to recognize that there are threats in our world today that require us to act earlier and more effectively. And I think we can debate the institutional structure within which that should happen in the United Nations and elsewhere, but I also think that when we look at this global terrorism that we face, there is -- to me, at any rate -- a very clear link between the terrorism that is afflicting virtually every country in the Western world, either in actuality or potentially, the terrorism that is happening all over different countries of the Middle East and in Asia and elsewhere, and the terrorism that is there in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And one of the things I think, certainly for our people they find most difficult to understand, is, they will say, well, is it -- can it be worth everything that we are doing? I mean, it's such a huge sacrifice that is being made. Can it be worth it? And I think the answer to that is, it is worth it to those engaged in this violence and terrorism to try to stop us, and we should have the same faith and confidence in our determination to succeed as they have in their determination to make us fail.

And I think that is an issue for the whole of the international community, because I've got no doubt at all that if we do succeed, as I believe that we will in Iraq, difficult though it will be, and we succeed in Afghanistan, then the whole of this global terrorism will suffer a defeat. And that's why I think we need an international community that's capable of recognizing these problems and acting on them.

PRESIDENT BUSH: I'd like to see a United Nations that's effective, one that joins us in trying to rid the world of tyranny, one that is willing to advance human rights and human dignity at its core, one that's an unabashed organization -- is unabashed in their desire to spread freedom. That's what I'd like to see, because I believe that freedom will yield to peace. I also believe freedom is universal. I don't believe freedom is just a concept only for America or Great Britain. It's a universal concept. And it troubles me to know that there are people locked in tyrannical societies that suffer. And the United Nations ought to be clear about its desire to liberate people from the clutches of tyranny. That's what the United Nations ought to be doing, as far as I'm concerned.

Yes, Steve.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. How close are you to an agreement on a package of incentives for Iran? And what does Iran stand to gain if it were to give up its enrichment program? And why are you ignoring these recent back-channel overtures from Iran?

PRESIDENT BUSH: We spent a great deal of time talking about the Iranian issue, and one of the goals that Tony and I had was to convince others in the world that Iran, with a nuclear weapon, would be very dangerous, and therefore, we do have a common goal. And the fundamental question is, how do you achieve that goal, obviously. We want to do it diplomatically.

Right now, we, as a matter of fact, spent a lot of time upstairs talking about how to convince the Iranians that this coalition we put together is very serious. One option, of course, is through the United Nations Security Council. And we strategized about how do we convince other partners that the Security Council is the way to go if the Iranians won't suspend like the EU3 has asked them to do. The Iranians walked away from the table. They're the ones who made the decision, and the choice is theirs. Now, if they would like to see an enhanced package, the first thing they've got to do is suspend their operations, for the good of the world. It's incredibly dangerous to think of an Iran with a nuclear weapon.

And therefore, Steve, to answer your questions, of course, we'll look at all options, but it's their choice right now. They're the folks who walked away from the table. They're the ones who said that, your demands don't mean anything to us.

Now, in terms of -- you said back channels --

Q Back-channel overtures.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Well, I read the letter of the President and I thought it was interesting. It was, like, 16 or 17 single-spaced typed pages of -- but he didn't address the issue of whether or not they're going to continue to press for a nuclear weapon. That's the issue at hand.

And so it's -- we have no beef with the Iranian people. As a matter of fact, the United States respects the culture and history of Iran, and we want there to be an Iran that's confident, and an Iran that answers to the needs of the -- we want women in Iran to be free. At the same time, we're going to continue to work with a government that is intransigent, that won't budge. And so we've got to continue to work to convince them that we're serious; that if they want to be isolated from the world, we will work to achieve that.

Q Should this enhanced package include a light-water reactor and a security guarantee?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Steve, you're responding to press speculation. I've just explained to you that the Iranians walked away from the table, and that I think we ought to be continuing to work on ways to make it clear to them that they will be isolated. And one way to do that is to continue to work together through the United Nations Security -- if they suspend and have the IAEA in there making sure that the suspension is real, then, of course, we'll talk about ways forward, incentives.

Q Prime Minister, you've both talked a little about the U.N. I know that you believe the U.N. needs vigorous leadership and you're going to pick up on these themes in your speech tomorrow. Is that a job application? And, if not --

PRESIDENT BUSH: Wait a minute. (Laughter.)

Q -- do you both have a sense -- do you have someone in mind? And, if not, how are you going to get the reform at the U.N. you want to see?

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: No, no and I'm not sure -- (laughter) -- is the answer to those ones. Look, what we want to do is to make sure the U.N. is an effective instrument of multilateral action. That's what everyone wants to see. And the fact is there are multiple problems in the world; they require the international community to respond on a collective basis -- but you've got to have an effective set of multilateral institutions to do that. And that's true whether you're tackling global poverty or trying to resolve disputes or, indeed, when you're dealing with issues like Iran.

The whole point about the international community today is that these problems are urgent, they need to be tackled. If they're not tackled the consequences are very quickly felt around the world, and you've got to have institutions that are capable of taking them on and tackling them and getting action taken.

Now, we were just talking about Iran a moment ago. I mean, we want to have this resolved through the process of the multilateral institutions. There's a way we can do this. I mean, after all, we are the ones saying the Atomic Energy Authority, their duties and obligations they lay upon Iran should be adhered to. And we've got absolutely no quarrel with the Iranian people. The Iranian people are a great people; Iran is a great country. But it needs a government that is going to recognize that part of being a great country is to be in line with your international obligations, and to cease supporting those people in different parts of the world who want, by terrorism and violence, to disrupt the process of democracy.

So I think that our position with Iran is a very reasonable one, and we want to see how we can make

progress and help them to do the things that we believe that they should do, but they must understand that the will of the international community is sure and is clear, and that is that the obligations that are upon them have got to be adhered to.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Stretch.

Q Thank you, Mr. President.

PRESIDENT BUSH: I call him Stretch.

Q And I've been called worse. (Laughter.) Has Treasury Secretary Snow given you any indication that he intends to leave his job any time soon?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Secretary of Treasury Snow?

Q Has he given you any indication he intends to leave his job any time soon? And related to that, Americans -- macroeconomic numbers are indeed good, but many Americans are concerned, increasingly concerned about rising health care costs, costs of gasoline. And does that make it hard for your administration, Treasury Secretary Snow, and everyone else to continue to talk up the economy?

PRESIDENT BUSH: No, he has not talked to me about resignation. I think he's doing a fine job. After all, our economy is -- it's strong. We grew at 3.5 percent last year; a good, strong first quarter this year. We added five -- 2.5 million new jobs, we've got 4.7 percent unemployment rate nationwide. Productivity is up, home ownership is high, small businesses are doing well. He's done a fine job.

And our -- obviously, people are concerned about rising fuel prices -- all the more reason to get off oil and to promote alternatives, such as ethanol or battery technologies that will enable us to drive the first 40 miles on electricity. We're spending about $1.2 billion over the next 10 years to develop hydrogen fuel cells. We want -- we need to get away from hydrocarbons here in America, for economic security, for national security, and for environmental reasons, as well.

One way we could help alleve gasoline prices here in America is for the Congress to pass some regulatory relief so we can actually expand refining capacity. We haven't built a new refinery here since the 1970s. And curiously enough, when demand for a product goes up with tight supply, price follows. And so we put out some logical ways for Congress to work with the administration to relieve price pressures on gasoline.

As far as health care goes, there are some practical ways to deal with health care costs, and one of the most practical ways is to get rid of these junk lawsuits that are running good doctors out of practice and running up the price of medicine. Passed it out of the House. They can't get it out of the Senate because the lawyers won't let it out. But we put forth a common-sense practice to deal with rising health care costs, as well.

Q You both presented the Iraqi government as a substantial vindication of the conflict. Do you also

accept, as a matter of harsh political reality, that the Iraq conflict has also left both of you politically weakened and, whether justly or unjustly, less able to give the kind of moral leadership that you're discussing today?

PRESIDENT BUSH: No question that the Iraq war has created a sense of consternation here in America. I mean, when you turn on your TV screen and see innocent people die, day in and day out, it affects the mentality of our country.

But here's what they're asking in America. They're asking, can we win? That's what they want to know. Do we have a strategy for victory? And so the talk about the unity government -- you might remember there was some -- a lot of speculation as to whether there would even be a unity government. A couple of months ago, people were saying, well, they can't even get a unity government going. But we have a unity government -- a Kurd President, a Prime Minister who is a Shia, a Speaker who is a Sunni. These are strong leaders. It's an indication that progress is being made.

Part of progress, of course, is on the political track. You know, we had elections in Iraq; 12 million people voted last December. Now, it seems like an eternity ago, I know, like a decade. But that's not all that long ago in the larger scope of things. Twelve million people said, we want to be free. It was an astounding moment. And this unity government is now formed, as a result of those elections, under a constitution approved by the Iraqi people. That's progress. It's certainly a far sight from the days of a tyrant who killed hundreds of thousands of his own people and used weapons of mass destruction and threatened the neighborhood. I mean, that is progress.

No question, however, that the suiciders and the killers and the IEDs and the deaths have an effect on the American people. But one of the reasons that I appreciate Tony coming is that he brings a fresh perspective of what he saw, and the American people need to know we are making progress toward a goal of an Iraq that can defend itself, sustain itself and govern itself. That will deny the terrorists a safe haven.

You know, al Qaeda has made it clear what their intentions are in Iraq. I'm sure you've read some of the intercepts that are laid out there for people to see. And they have made it clear that it's just a matter of time for countries like Great Britain and the United States to leave. In other words, if they make life miserable enough, we'll leave. And they want us to leave because they want a safe haven from which to launch attacks, not only on us, but on moderate Muslim governments, as well. These people are totalitarians. They're Islamic fascists. They have a point of view, they have a philosophy, and they want to impose that philosophy on the rest of the world. And Iraq just happens to be a -- one of the battles in the war on terror.

And Tony brings up a good point: Why are they resisting so hard, what is it about democracy they can't stand? Well, what they can't stand about democracy is this: Democracy is the exact opposite of what they believe. They believe they can impose their will, they believe there's no freedom of religion, they believe there's no women's rights. They have a -- they have a dark vision of the world, and that's why they're resisting so mightily.

So yes, I can understand why the American people are troubled by the war in Iraq. I understand that.

But I also believe the sacrifice is worth it and is necessary, and I believe a free Iraq is not only going to make ourselves more secure, but it's going to serve as a powerful example in the Middle East.

You know, foreign policy, for awhile, just basically said, if it seems okay on the surface, just let it be. And guess what happened? There was resentment and hatred that enabled these totalitarians to recruit and to kill, which they want to continue to do to achieve their objectives. And the best way to defeat them in the long run is through the spread of liberty.

And liberty has had the capacity to change enemies to allies. Liberty has had the capacity to help Europe become whole, free, and at peace. History has proven that freedom has got the capacity to change the world for the better, and that's what you're seeing.

You know, the amazing thing about dealing with Prime Minister Blair is never once has he said to me on the phone, we better change our tactics because of the political opinion polls. And I appreciate that steadfast leadership. And I appreciate somebody who has got a vision, a shared vision, for how to not only protect ourselves in the war on terror, but how to make the world a better place.

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: I don't really think it's a matter of our vindication. I think, in a way, that's the least important part of it. But I do think that occasionally we should just take a step back and ask, why are we doing this? Why is it so important?

Saddam was removed from power three years ago. Since then, incidentally, our forces have been there with the United Nations mandate and with the consent of the Iraqi government, itself, the Iraqi government, becoming progressively more the product of direct democracy.

So whatever people thought about removing Saddam -- you agree with it, you didn't agree with it for these last three years, the issue in Iraq has not been, these people are here without any international support, because we haven't had any United Nations resolution governing our presence there. The issue is not, you're there, but the Iraqi people don't want you there, because the Iraqi government, and now this directly-elected Iraqi government has said they want us to stay until the job is done.

So why is it that for three years, we have had this violence and bloodshed? Now, people have tried to say it's because the Iraqi people -- you people, you don't understand; you went in with this Western concept of democracy and you didn't understand that their whole culture was different, they weren't interested in these types of freedom. These people have gone out and voted -- a higher turnout, I have to say -- I'm afraid to say, I think, than either your election or mine. These people have gone out and voted --

PRESIDENT BUSH: Which one? 2000 or 2004? (Laughter.)

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: I think both of them.

PRESIDENT BUSH: I think you're right. (Laughter.)

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: They have gone out and voted despite terrorism, despite bloodshed, despite literally the prospect of death for exercising their democratic right.

So they have kept faith with the very democratic values that we say we believe in, and the people trying to wrest that democracy from them are opposed to absolutely everything we stand for and everything the Iraqi people stand for.

So what do we do in response to this? And the problem we have is very, very simple. A large part of the perspective with which we look at this is to see every act of terrorism in Iraq, every piece of ghastly carnage on our television screens, every tragic loss of our own forces -- we see that as a setback and as a failure when we should be seeing that as a renewed urgency for us to rise to the challenge of defeating these people who are committing this carnage. Because over these past three years, at every stage, the reason they have been fighting is not, as we can see, because Iraqi people don't believe in democracy, Iraqi people don't want liberty. It is precisely because they fear Iraqi people do want democracy, Iraqi people do want liberty.

And if the idea became implanted in the minds of people in the Arab and Muslim world that democracy was as much their right as our right, where do these terrorists go? What do they do? How do they recruit? How do they say, America is the evil Satan? How do they say the purpose of the West is to spoil your lands, wreck your religion, take your wealth? How can they say that? They can't say that.

So these people who are fighting us there know what is at stake. The question is, do we?

PRESIDENT BUSH: I'm going to say, that was a great answer. (Laughter.)

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: Yours was pretty good, too. (Laughter.)

Q You have your chance now. (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT BUSH: Another chance -- good. Well, thank you, Martha.

Q Mr. President, you have said time and time again, and again tonight, when Iraqi forces stand up, coalition forces can start standing down.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Right.

Q But the fact is, you have been standing up Iraqi forces in great numbers. The administration says you have hundreds of thousand trained and equipped, tens of thousand leading the fight. And yet, during the same period they've been standing up there has not been a substantial decrease in U.S. and coalition forces. So what does that tell us about how meaningful the figures are on Iraqi troops? And what does that tell us about a potential for a draw-down?

PRESIDENT BUSH: It tells you that the commanders on the ground are going to make the decision, that's what that tells you. And when they feel comfortable in recommending to me fewer troops, I will

accept that. But they're going to make that recommendation based upon the conditions on the ground. I know I keep saying that, and it probably bores you that I keep giving the same answer, but I haven't changed my opinion.

I talk to our commanders all the time. They feel strongly that the Iraqi army is getting better. It's hard to have a command and control system with an Iraqi army when you don't have a defense minister. And so Mr. Maliki is going to have to pick one soon. And then our commanders will gauge as to whether or not the command and control structure is sufficient to be able to enable the Iraqis to take more of the fight. They are taking more of the fight, by the way. They're in more provinces than ever before. They're taking over more territory. They're taking over more missions. There are some gaps that we need to continue to work on to fill -- the transportation issue is going to need to be dealt with over time.

All I can report to you is what General Casey -- in whom I have got a lot of confidence -- tells me, and that is the Iraqis are becoming better and better fighters. And at some point in time, when he feels like the government is ready to take on more responsibility and the Iraqi forces are able to help them do so, he will get on the telephone with me and say, Mr. President, I think we can do this with fewer troops. We've been up to 165,000 at one point; we're at about 135,000 now.

Q (Inaudible.)

PRESIDENT BUSH: Hold on for a second. Actually, he moved some additional troops from Kuwait into Baghdad. Conditions on the ground were such that we needed more support in Baghdad, to secure Baghdad, so he informed me, through Donald Rumsfeld, that he wanted to move troops out of Kuwait into Baghdad.

So these commanders, they need to have flexibility in order to achieve the objective. You don't want politicians making decisions based upon politics. You want the Commander-in-Chief making decisions based upon what the military thinks is the right way to achieve the objective. I've set the objective, it's clear for everybody -- a country that can sustain itself, defend itself and govern itself. And we're making progress on all fronts. But as to how many troops we have there will depend upon the generals and their commanders saying, this is what we need to do the job, Mr. President, and that's the way it's going to be so long as I'm standing here as the Commander-in-Chief, which is two-and-a-half more years.

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: I spoke to General Casey and to our own General Fry in Baghdad on Monday. We sat down and talked this very issue through. And I think what you will find is that progressively there will be more and more parts of Iraq that are policed by the Iraqi security forces themselves, and their capability is improving. But I also think you will find probably over the next few months there will be a real attempt by the anti-democratic forces to test them very, very strongly. And remember, a lot of the attacks are now happening not on the multinational force, although those attacks continue, of course, but actually on the Iraqi forces themselves, on their police, on their army and so on. And the purpose, of course, of that is to deter them from the very buildup of capability that we want to see.

But over the course of the next few months, you will see progressively those provinces in Iraq coming

under Iraqi control, and then, of course, it will be for the Iraqis to sort out that responsibility.

PRESIDENT BUSH: One thing, Martha, is that we want to make sure we complete the mission, that we achieve our objective. A loss in Iraq would make this world an incredibly dangerous place. Remember there is not only sectarian violence, a hangover from Saddam's era, but there is an al Qaeda presence, in the form of Zarqawi, who wants to sow as much havoc as possible to cause us to leave before the mission is complete.

Listen, I want our troops out, don't get me wrong. I understand what it means to have troops in harm's way. And I know there's a lot of families making huge sacrifices here in America. I'll be going to a Memorial Day ceremony next Monday paying tribute to those who have lost their life. I'm sure I will see families of the fallen. I fully understand the pressures being placed upon our military and their families. But I also understand that it is vital that we -- that we do the job, that we complete the mission. And it has been tough, it's been really tough, because we're fighting an unconventional enemy that is willing to kill innocent people. There are no rules of war for these people. But make no mistake about it, what you're seeing in Iraq could happen all over the world if we don't stand fast and achieve the objective.

No, I had the follow-up answer, you can't have a follow-up question. Nice try, though.

Q Prime Minister, this is possibly your last official visit to Washington as Prime Minister --

PRESIDENT BUSH: Wait a minute. (Laughter.) Back-to-back disses.

Q At least the beginning of the end of your particular special relationship. Will you miss the President? What will you miss about him? (Laughter.)

And for the President, what will you miss about Tony Blair, and what are you looking for in an eventual replacement?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Hmmm -- I'll miss those red ties, is what I'll miss. (Laughter.) I'll say one thing -- he can answer the question -- don't count him out. Let me tell it to you that way. I know a man of resolve and vision and courage. And my attitude is, I want him to be here so long as I'm the President.

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: Well, what more can I say? (Laughter.) Probably not wise to say anything more at all. (Laughter.)

You guys, come on, I want you to -- the British delegation, ask a few serious questions. (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT BUSH: Right.

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: Or we'll go on to one of you guys. (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT BUSH: Plante.

Q Perhaps I can change the mood. Mr. President, you talk about setting the objective. But our people, my colleagues on the ground in Iraq, say that when they talk to American troops, the rank and file, they say they don't believe that they've had enough to do the job. They say further that while the Iraqi army may be improving, there is absolutely no way to depend upon the police, who they say are corrupt and aligned with militias. All of this going on -- what reason is there to believe that the new government can do any better with these people than we've been able to do so far?

PRESIDENT BUSH: There are several tracks, Bill. One is the political track. I think it's very important for the Iraqi people to have a government that has been elected under a constitution they approved. In other words, the political track has been a vital part of having a country that can govern itself and defend itself.

There's a security track. And there's no question that there are a lot of Iraqis trained to fight, and many of them are good fighters -- 117,000 have been trained and equipped. There needs to be more equipment; no question about that. The Iraqis -- I think if you were get a -- at least the assessment I get, is that the Iraqi army is moving well along and they're taking more and more of the territory over in order to defend their country.

No question we've got a lot of work to do on the police. General Casey has said publicly that the year 2006 is -- is the year that we'll train the police up and running. Perhaps the place where there needs to be the most effective police force is in Baghdad. I just told you we're moving more troops in. There's a -- General Casey met today with the Prime Minister to talk about how to secure Baghdad. It's really important that Baghdad -- that a capital city become more secure. And there's plans to deal with the contingencies on the ground. All I can tell you is, is that we're making progress toward the goal.

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: And I'd like to say something, again, about the discussions I had on Monday. I think that what is important is to try and get a sense of balance in this. Look, it would be completely foolish for us to say, there are no problems with either the police or the army, you've got a full force capability in the way that we want. And nobody is actually saying that.

It would also be wrong to turn it around the other way, though, even in respect to the police. I had quite a detailed discussion, not, in fact, with the generals, but some of the ordinary soldiers who -- British soldiers there up in Baghdad, and also with some of the people who are working with the police at the moment. And what they said to me is, yes, there are real problems to do with corruption in parts of the police force, but actually, there is also another side to it, which there are people who are really dedicated and really committed to a non-sectarian Iraq, who also are playing their part.

Now I think the whole question is whether this new government can then grip this in the way, in a sense, that only they can. You see, I think this is where, inevitably, over time, we have to transfer responsibility. And that is, of course, what we wish to do, and part of that is because it is easier for an Iraqi interior minister who is the product of an Iraqi-elected government, to go in and take the really tough measure sometimes that is necessary to sort some of these issues out.

But I can assure you of two things. First of all, there is another, more positive side to the Iraqi forces -- both the army, and in parts of the police, as well. And, secondly, the Iraqi government knows that this

is the absolute prerequisite of success for them. It's just -- one of the ministers said to me, he said, you should understand, our state was a completely failed state; the police -- people didn't go to the police in Iraq if they had a problem under Saddam. They had a problem if they were in contact with the police because of the way the state was run.

And so you're talking about literally building the institutions of a state from scratch. And I don't think it's, in one sense, very surprising that it is both difficult and taking time. But I think that they do know that this is of vital importance for them to succeed. And I think that you may find that it is easier for Iraqis to do this themselves and take some of these measures necessary, than it is for us, although we would be there, obviously, in support of what they're doing.

Q Mr. President, you spoke about missteps and mistakes in Iraq. Could I ask both of you which missteps and mistakes of your own you most regret?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Sounds like kind of a familiar refrain here -- saying "bring it on," kind of tough talk, you know, that sent the wrong signal to people. I learned some lessons about expressing myself maybe in a little more sophisticated manner -- you know, "wanted dead or alive," that kind of talk. I think in certain parts of the world it was misinterpreted, and so I learned from that. And I think the biggest mistake that's happened so far, at least from our country's involvement in Iraq is Abu Ghraib. We've been paying for that for a long period of time. And it's -- unlike Iraq, however, under Saddam, the people who committed those acts were brought to justice. They've been given a fair trial and tried and convicted.

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: I think inevitably some of the things that we thought were going to be the biggest challenge proved not to be, and some of the things we didn't expect to be challenges at all proved to be immense. I think that probably in retrospect -- though at the time it was very difficult to argue this -- we could have done the de-Baathification in a more differentiated way than we did.

I think that the most difficult thing, however, has been the determination of people to move against the democratic process in Iraq in a way that I think -- as I was saying a moment or two ago -- indicates our opponents' very clear view from a very early stage that they have to stop the democratic process working. And I think it's easy to go back over mistakes that we may have made, but the biggest reason why Iraq has been difficult is the determination of our opponents to defeat us. And I don't think we should be surprised at that.

Maybe in retrospect, when we look back, it should have been very obvious to us, and is obvious still in Afghanistan that for them, it is very clear. You know, they can't afford to have these countries turned round, and I think that probably, there was a whole series of things in Iraq that were bound to come out once you got al Qaeda and other groups operating in there to cause maximum destruction and damage. And therefore, I'm afraid in the end, we're always going to have to be prepared for the fall of Saddam not to be the rise of democratic Iraq, that it was going to be a more difficult process.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Mr. Prime Minister, can I buy you dinner?

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: Certainly.

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