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President Bush Discusses Global War on Terror

The Heritage Foundation
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12:47 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Ed, thanks. Thanks for the kind introduction. I'm looking forward to working with you for the next 14 months -- but you better put on your running shoes, because my spirits are high, my energy level is good and I'm sprinting to the finish line. (Applause.)

I congratulate you on your 30th anniversary as President -- (laughter.) No such thing as term limits here. (Laughter.) And rightly so, because Ed is a person who has taken the conservative movement from one that used to meet in a phone booth here in Washington -- (laughter) -- to a robust group of folks who are shaping policy in Washington, D.C. As a matter of fact, you've got a little bigger phone booth these days than you did 30 years ago. (Laughter.)

I appreciate all you've done and I really want to thank Heritage. One of the interesting things about the Heritage legacy is that the folks here have been tireless advocates, tireless champions of liberty, and free enterprise, and democracy and religious freedom. These are values that came under attack on September the 11th, 2001. Our nation was attacked by a brutal enemy that despises freedom, that rejects tolerance, that kills the innocent in the pursuit of a dark vision. These folks believe that it's okay to subjugate women and indoctrinate children and murder those who oppose their harsh rule. They have stated clearly they want to impose this ideology on millions. They're at war with America because they hate what they stand for -- and they understand we stand in their way.



And so today I've come to talk to you about the war on terror, my firm commitment that we'll do

everything in our power to protect the American people, and my call on the United States Congress to give us the tools necessary so we can do the job the American people expect.

I, too, want to thank the members of the Heritage Foundation Board of Trustees who have joined us. Thank you for supporting this important organization. I can't tell you how important it is to have good centers of thought in Washington, D.C. -- people who are willing to look at today's problems and come up with innovative solution based upon sound principle to solve those problems. And that's how I view Heritage.

I thank all the members and guests who've joined us today, as well. It's a pleasure to be with you.

It's been now more than six years since the enemy attacked us on September the 11th, and we are blessed that there has not been another attack on our soil. With the passage of time, the memories of the 9/11 attacks have grown more distant. And for some, there's a temptation to think that the threats to our country have grown distant as well. They have not.

The terrorists who struck America that September morning intend to strike us again. We know this, because the enemy has told us so. Just last year, Osama bin Laden warned the American people, "Operations are under preparation, and you will see them on your own ground once they are finished." Seven months later, British authorities broke up the most ambitious known al Qaeda plot since the 9/11 attacks -- a plot to blow up passenger airplanes flying over the Atlantic toward the United States. Our intelligence community believes that this plot was just two or three weeks away from execution. If it had been carried out, it could have rivaled 9/11 in death and destruction.



The lesson of this experience is clear. We must take the words of the enemy seriously. The terrorists have stated their objectives. They intend to build a totalitarian Islamic empire -- encompassing all current and former Muslim lands, stretching from Europe to North Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. In pursuit of their imperial aims, these extremists say there can be no compromise or dialog with those they call infidels -- a category that includes America, the world's free nation [sic], Jews, and all Muslims who reject their extreme vision of Islam. They reject the possibility of peaceful coexistence with the free world. Again, hear the words of Osama bin Laden last year: "Death is better than living on this Earth with the unbelievers among us."

History teaches that underestimating the words of evil, ambitious men is a terrible mistake. In the early 1900s, the world ignored the words of Lenin, as he laid out his plans to launch a Communist revolution in Russia -- and the world paid a terrible price. The Soviet Empire he established killed tens of millions, and brought the world to the brink of thermonuclear war.

In the 1920s, the world ignored the words of Hitler, as he explained his intention to build an Aryan super-state in Germany, take revenge on Europe, and eradicate the Jews -- and the world paid a terrible price. His Nazi regime killed millions in the gas chambers, and set the world aflame in war,

before it was finally defeated at a terrible cost in lives and treasure.

Bin Laden and his terrorist allies have made their intentions as clear as Lenin and Hitler before them. And the question is: Will we listen? America and our coalition partners are listening. We have made our choice. We take the words of the enemy seriously. Over the past six years, we have captured or killed hundreds of terrorists. We have disrupted their finances. We have prevented new attacks before they could be carried out. We removed regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq that had supported terrorists and threatened our citizens, and in so doing, liberated 50 million people from the clutches of tyranny. (Applause.)

With our allies, we're keeping the pressure on the enemy. We're keeping him on the move. We're fighting them everywhere they make their stand -- from the mountains of Afghanistan, to the deserts of Iraq, to the islands of Southeast Asia and the Horn of Africa. On every battlefield, we're on the offense. We're keeping constant pressure. And in this war on terror we will not rest, or retreat, or withdraw from the fight until this threat to civilization has been removed. (Applause.)

I fully understand that after six years, the sense of imminent danger has passed for some -- and it can be natural for people to forget the lessons of 9/11 as they go about their daily lives. I just want to assure you that I'll never forget the lessons of September the 11th, and nor will the people with whom I work. I know that when I discuss the war on terror, some here in Washington, D.C. dismiss it as political rhetoric -- an attempt to scare people into votes. Given the nature of the enemy and the words of its leaders, politicians who deny that we are at war are either being disingenuous or naive. Either way, it is dangerous for our country. We are at war -- and we cannot win this war by wishing it away or pretending it does not exist.

Unfortunately, on too many issues, some in Congress are behaving as if America is not at war. For example, in a time of war, it is vital for the President to have a full national security team in place -- and a key member of that team is the Attorney General. The job of the Attorney General is essential to the security of America. The Attorney General is the highest ranking official responsible for our law enforcement community's efforts to detect and prevent terrorist attacks here at home.

I've selected an outstanding nominee to fill this vital role: Judge Michael Mukasey. Judge Mukasey has a long record of accomplishments in matter of law and national security. He has been praised by Republicans and Democrats alike as a man of honesty, intellect, fairness and independence.

Judge Mukasey provided nearly six hours of testimony. He patiently answered more than 200 questions at the hearing. He has responded to nearly 500 written questions less than a week after his hearing. Yet the Senate Judiciary Committee has been holding up his nomination.

As a price of his confirmation, some on that committee want Judge Mukasey to take a legal position on specific techniques allegedly used to interrogate captured terrorists. As Judge Mukasey explained in a letter to committee members, he cannot do so for several reasons: First, he does not know whether certain methods of questioning are in fact used, because the program is classified -- and therefore he is in no position to provide an informed opinion. He has not been read into the program, and won't until he is confirmed and sworn in -- won't be until he is confirmed and sworn in as the Attorney General.

Second, he does not want an uninformed opinion to be taken by our professional interrogators in the field as placing them in legal jeopardy.

Finally, he does not want any statement of his to give the terrorists a window into which techniques we may use, and which ones we may not use. That could help them train their operatives to resist questioning, and withhold vital information we need to stop attacks and save lives.

In the war on terror, intelligence is one of the most crucial tools for our defense. If a captured terrorist has information about a plot against our homeland, we need to know what he knows. And so that's why I put in place, under the CIA, a program to question key terrorist operatives and its leaders. Last year, Congress passed a law that allows the CIA to continue this vital program. The procedures used in this program are safe. They are lawful. And they are necessary. (Applause.)

Senior leaders in the House and Senate, from both political parties, have been briefed on the details of this program. It's wrong for congressional leaders to make Judge Mukasey's confirmation dependent on his willingness to go on the record about the details of a classified program he has not been briefed on. If the Senate Judiciary Committee were to block Judge Mukasey on these grounds, they would set a new standard for confirmation that could not be met by any responsible nominee for Attorney General. And that would guarantee that America would have no Attorney General during this time of war.

By any measure, Judge Mukasey is eminently qualified to be the next Attorney General. And now, after allowing his nomination to languish for 41 days, the Senate Judiciary Committee has scheduled a vote for next Tuesday. Senate leaders must move this nomination out of committee, bring it to the Senate floor and confirm this good man. (Applause.)

Congress has also failed to act on intelligence legislation that is vital to protect the American people in this war on terror. Stopping new attacks on our country requires us to make sure we understand the intentions of the enemy. We've got to know what they're thinking and what they're planning. And that means we got to have effective measures to monitor their communications.

This summer, Congress passed the Protect America Act, which strengthened our ability to collect foreign intelligence on terrorists overseas and this good law closed a dangerous gap in our intelligence. Unfortunately, they made this law effective for only six months. The problem is that al Qaeda doesn't operate on a six-month timetable. (Laughter.) And if Congress doesn't act soon, the law will expire -- and the gap in our intelligence will reopen, and the United States of America will be at risk.

We must keep the intelligence gap firmly closed. If terrorists are communicating with each other and are plotting new attacks, we need to know what they're planning. (Applause.) We must ensure that the protections intended for the American people are not extended to terrorists overseas who are plotting to harm us. And we must grant liability protection to companies who are facing multibillion-dollar lawsuits only because they are believed to have assisted in the efforts to defend our nation following the 9/11 attacks.

The Senate Intel Committee has approved a bipartisan bill that contains provisions to preserve our

ability to collect intelligence on terrorists overseas, while protecting the civil liberties of Americans here at home. This bill still needs some improving, but it's an important step in the right direction. (Applause.) Time is of the essence, and the full Senate and the House of Representatives need to pass a good bill and get it to my desk promptly so our intelligence professionals can continue to use the vital tools of the Protect America Act to keep us safe. (Applause.)

Congress is also stalling on the emergency war supplemental to fund our troops on the front lines in Afghanistan and Iraq. This crucial bill includes funds for bullets and body armor, protection against IEDs and mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles. Congress should be able to move the supplemental quickly. There's no reason why they're not moving the supplemental -- after all, it had more than eight months to study most of its provisions. In fact, nearly 75 percent of the funding request in the supplemental was submitted along with my annual budget in February of this year. The supplemental is critical for our troops -- and Congress should not go home for the holidays while our men and women in uniform are waiting for the funds they need. (Applause.)

Congress also needs to pass the Department of Defense spending bill, as well as the funding bill for our nation's veterans. There are reports that congressional leaders may be considering combining the funding bills for our military and our veterans together with a bloated labor, health and education spending bill. It's hard to imagine a more cynical ploy than holding funding for our troops and our wounded warriors hostage in order to extract \$11 billion in wasteful Washington spending. If the reports of this strategy are true, I will veto such a three-bill pileup. (Applause.)

I ask Congress to send me a clean veterans funding bill by Veterans Day; and to pass a clean defense spending bill. Congress needs to put the needs of those who put on the uniform ahead of their desire to spend more money. When it comes to funding our troops, some in Washington should spend more time responding to the warnings of terrorists like Osama bin Laden and the requests of our commanders on the ground, and less time responding to the demands of MoveOn.org bloggers and Code Pink protesters. (Applause.)

Here's the bottom line: This is no time for Congress to weaken the Department of Justice by denying it a strong and effective leader. It's no time for Congress to weaken our ability to gather vital intelligence from captured terrorists. It's no time for Congress to weaken our ability to intercept information from terrorists about potential attacks on the United States of America. And this is no time for Congress to hold back vital funding for our troops as they fight al Qaeda terrorists and radicals in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the struggle against the terrorists and extremists, I hope I made my strategy clear today -- that we will keep constant pressure on the enemy in order to defend the American people; we will fight them overseas so we do not have to fight them here at home. (Applause.) At the same time, we'll use every available tool of law and intelligence to protect the people here. That's our most solemn duty. It's a duty I think about every day. In the long run, the only way to defeat the terrorists is to advance freedom as the great alternative to radicalism and repression.

We can have confidence in this cause because we have seen the power of liberty to transform nations and secure peace before. Here at the Heritage Foundation, you understand this better than most.

During the Cold War, there were loud voices in Washington who argued for accommodation of the Soviet Union -- because they believed the watchword of our policy should be "stability." At Heritage, you knew that when it came to the Soviet Union, the watchword of our policy should be "freedom."

Together with a great President named Ronald Reagan, you championed a policy of rolling back communism oppression and bringing freedom to nations enslaved by communist tyranny. And by taking the side of dissidents, who [sic] helped millions across the world throw off the shackles of communism, you helped build the free and peaceful societies that are the true sources of stability and peace in the world.

And now we're at the start of a new century, and the same debate is once again unfolding -- this time regarding my policy in the Middle East. Once again, voices in Washington are arguing that the watchword of the policy should be "stability." And once again they're wrong. In Kabul, in Baghdad, in Beirut, and other cities across the broader Middle East, brave men and women are risking their lives every day for the same freedoms we enjoy. And like the citizens of Prague and Warsaw and Budapest in the century gone by, they are looking to the United States to stand up for them, speak out for them, and champion their cause. And we are doing just that. (Applause.)

We are standing with those who yearn for the liberty -- who yearn for liberty in the Middle East, because we understand that the desire for freedom is universal, written by the Almighty into the hearts of every man, woman and child on this Earth. (Applause.)

We are standing with those who yearn for liberty in the Middle East, because we know that the terrorists fear freedom even more than they fear our firepower. They know that given a choice, no one will choose to live under their dark ideology of violence and death.

We're standing with those who yearn for liberty in the Middle East, because we know that when free societies take root in that part of the world, they will yield the peace we all desire. See, the only way the terrorists can recruit operatives and suicide bombers is by feeding on the hopelessness of societies mired in despair. And by bringing freedom to these societies, we replace hatred with hope, and this will help us to marginalize the extremists and eliminate the conditions that feed radicalism, and make the American people more secure.

The lessons of the past have taught us that liberty is transformative. And I believe 50 years from now an American President will be speaking to Heritage and say, thank God that generation that wrote the first chapter in the 21st century understood the power of freedom to bring the peace we want. (Applause.)

Thank you for coming. God bless. (Applause.)

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