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For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
April 8, 2003

President Bush Meets with Prime Minister Blair in Northern Ireland

Hillsborough Castle
Belfast, Northern Ireland

11:08 A.M. (Local)


PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: Good morning, everyone. First of all, I would like to extend a very warm welcome to President Bush to Northern Ireland.

America has long been a friend of Northern Ireland and a friend to us in this important period for the peace process. So it's both significant and welcome that the President is here in person to give, once more, his support, and to join with me and, later today, with the Irish Taoiseach in urging the parties to take the final steps towards a lasting peace here in Northern Ireland.

It's also perhaps fitting that here in Northern Ireland a good part of our discussion focused on the Middle East. It's not so many years ago that it would have been said that the peace process here was in far worse shape than the process out in the Middle East. Yet, here we are, for all the difficulties in Northern Ireland, able to point back to real improvements in the security and the standard of living of people here, and to point forward to turning progress into lasting change, lasting security and lasting peace, which is what people want to see here. And we've made that progress because of patience and perseverance, and because friends like those in the United States of America have helped us get there.

So, to those who can sometimes say that the process in the Middle East is hopeless, I say we can look at Northern Ireland and take some hope from that.

I want to thank the President also for the impetus he has given to the two-state solution in the Middle East that he outlined last June, a secure Israel and a viable Palestinian state; and for his decision that the road map be published -- which, as you know, depends upon the foundation of Abu Mazen's cabinet.



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Of course, our discussions have naturally continued to focus upon Iraq, upon the continuing military campaign, where, once again, our forces have performed superbly. And I want to pay tribute to the U.S., UK, and other coalition forces. In all parts of the country, our power is strengthening, the regime is weakening, the Iraqi people are turning towards us.

I'd like to pay tribute to the professionalism and the compassion that they continue to show, and to express my condolences to the families of those that have lost their lives in this conflict -- most recently, the three brave soldiers who lost their lives fighting to liberate Basra. I think anyone who has seen the joy on the faces of people in Basra as they realize that the regime that they detest is finally collapsing knows very well that this was, indeed, a war of liberation and not of conquest.

On weapons of mass destruction, we know that the regime has them. We know that as the regime collapses, we will be led to them. We pledged to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, and we will keep that commitment.

On Saddam, his grip on power has been prized away. He has ruled by fear, but as the knowledge sinks in that we will get the job done, the people realize there's not going to be a repeat of 1991, there's not going to be a repeat of the past. The power of Saddam is ending.



And our enemy in this conflict has always been Saddam and his regime, not the Iraqi people. We are the friends of the Iraqi people. So much of our discussion today has focused on how we continue to get vital supplies of food, water and medicines to them, and how we help the process of transition to the day when Iraq is governed by the Iraqi people for the Iraqi people.

As we said, our forces will not stay in Iraq a day longer than is necessary. We will take on the legal and moral obligations that will fall to us as the forces on the ground to stabilize the country, to keep basic services going, to protect civilian life. Then we will help Iraq move as swiftly as possible to an interim authority run by Iraqis. And that, in turn, is designed to pave the way for a truly representative government which respects human rights and the rule of law; which spends Iraq's wealth not on palaces and weapons of mass destruction, but on the well-being, prosperity of the people of Iraq.

And this new Iraq that will emerge is not to be run either by us or, indeed, by the U.N. That is a false choice. It will be run by the Iraqi people. All of us will do what we can to help in that process of transition. We are, of course, agreed, as we say in our joint statement, that there will be a vital role for the United Nations in the reconstruction of Iraq. But the key is that Iraq, in the end, should be governed by the Iraqi people.

Once again, let me thank President Bush for coming here. Let me say, as well as our own pride in our own forces during the course of this conflict, we have watched with immense admiration the skill and tenacity and professionalism of the American forces. This is a strong alliance. We're strong allies. And I think, day by day, the proof of the wisdom of that alliance grows.

Thank you.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you very much, Tony. It's an honor to be with you again. It's -- I'm really pleased to be here in Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister is a man of his word. He is a man of great ability, deep conviction, and steady courage. He has my admiration, and he has the admiration of the American people.



Our two countries are joined in large tasks because we share fundamental convictions. We believe that free nations have the responsibility to confront terrorism. We believe free nations must oppose the spread of weapons of mass destruction. And we believe that free nations must advance human rights and dignity across the world. We believe that the just demands of the international community must be enforced, not ignored. We believe this so strongly that we are acting on our convictions.

America and Britain have been partners in Afghanistan, where a terrorist regime has been replaced by a government committed to justice and to peace. At this moment, our military forces are fighting side-by-side in Iraq to defend our security and to free that nation from oppression. Our governments are working to help bring about a settlement in the Middle East that protects the rights of Israelis and Palestinians, that promotes the peace, that promotes security, that promotes human dignity.

In Northern Ireland, the Prime Minister and I are committed to helping the parties take the final steps toward a lasting peace. Later this week, Prime Minister Blair and the Taoiseach will release a plan setting out the remaining actions that must be taken to realize the promise of the Good Friday Agreement. I support, and my government strongly supports their efforts. At the meeting this afternoon I will urge Northern Ireland's political leaders to adopt this plan as their own.

This is an historic moment, and I ask all the communities of Northern Ireland to seize this opportunity for peace.

Prime Minister Blair and I are also reviewing the course of the battle in Iraq. We're spending a lot of time talking about that country's future beyond war and beyond tyranny. As the Prime Minister mentioned, our armed services are conducting themselves with great courage and, at the same time, great humanity. I'm proud of our forces. I'm proud of the British forces. We're both proud of the Australian forces.

We share sacrifices; we share grief. We pray for those families who mourn the loss of life -- American families, British families. And as this war has progressed, the world has witnessed the brutal desperation, the true character of the Iraqi regime. The world is also witnessing the liberation and humanitarian aid our coalition is bringing to that country as a new day begins in Iraq.

In fighting this war, we're taking every precaution to protect innocent life. We're showing respect for the Iraqi people, respect for their culture. There will be difficult fighting ahead, yet the outcome is not in doubt: Iraq will be free.

After the current regime is removed, our coalition will work to restore electricity and water supplies, medical care, and other essential services in Iraq. We'll move as quickly as possible to place governmental responsibilities under the control of an interim authority composed of Iraqis from both inside and outside the country. The interim authority will serve until a permanent government can be chosen by the Iraqi people. The rebuilding of Iraq will require the support and expertise of the international community. We're committed to working with international institutions, including the United Nations, which will have a vital role to play in this task.

This work when the war is finished will not be easy, but we're going to see it through. A free Iraq will be ruled by laws, not by a dictator. A free Iraq will be peaceful, and not a friend to terrorists or a menace to its neighbors. A free Iraq will give up all its weapons of mass destruction. A free Iraq will set itself on the path to democracy. The end of Saddam's regime will also remove a source of violence and instability in the Middle East.

Prime Minister Blair and I are determined to move toward our vision of broader peace in that region. We're committed to implementing the road map toward peace, to bring closer the day when two states, Israel and Palestine, live side-by-side in peace and stability.

Peace in the Middle East will require overcoming deep divisions of history and religion. Yet we know this is possible; it is happening in Northern Ireland. We are proving that old patterns of bitterness and violence, the habits of hatred and retribution, can be broken when one generation makes the choice to break those habits. And now this process of healing must be carried forward.

The United States and the United Kingdom accept our responsibilities -- accept our responsibilities for peace; we accept our responsibilities for security. Across the world, we are meeting these responsibilities together. America has no finer ally than the United Kingdom, and no finer friend than the Prime Minister. And I'm grateful for his leadership in these crucial days.

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: Right, Adam.

Q Mr. President, welcome to Northern Ireland. I wonder if I could ask you how you feel about meeting the leaders of the Republican movement, bearing in mind that unlike Saddam Hussein, they have directly targeted British civilians, British politicians, members of the British military and the police -- and also, of course, they oppose the war. So you're welcoming Gerry Adams, apparently, and, yet, you're not going to see someone like the Democratic Unionists who are a constitutional party opposed to terrorism.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Right. This isn't my first time I've met Mr. Adams or any of the other parties who have committed to the Good Friday Agreement -- as a matter of fact, I welcomed to the Oval Office, around St. Patrick's Day of this year, and last year, and the year before.

I am honored to have been asked to be here to help move the process along. These are men who have committed to an agreement that the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach worked a long time to achieve. They've signed on to a process that will yield peace. They have agreed to put hatreds in the past. They have



agreed to say the history is just that -- history. And they look forward to a future in which young generations of Northern Irelanders can grow up in peace. That's what they've committed themselves to. And as a result of making that commitment, I am perfectly comfortable about urging them to see the process through.

There is such hope here in Northern Ireland that the past can be broken. And the Prime Minister is right when he says that when the peace process is successful here, it will send a really important signal to other parts of the world. It will confirm the fact that people who have a vision for peace can see that vision become a reality.

It's the same vision we need to have in the Middle East. It's a hopeful time in the Middle East, as far as I'm concerned. I believe we can make substantial progress. I'm pleased with the new leader of the Palestinian Authority. I look forward to him finally putting his cabinet in place so we can release the road map.

I believe peace is possible. Being here in Northern Ireland even makes me even more firm in my belief that peace is possible. I've talked at length with the Prime Minister about how hard he had to work to bring the process this far. I'm willing to expend the same amount of energy in the Middle East. And so I hope these leaders hear me when I say that -- achieve the agreement, because it will have an effect beyond Northern Ireland. And I think it will.

Yes, Ron.

Q Mr. President, how reliable was the intelligence that put Saddam Hussein at the site of last night's attack? Did he survive? And given the incursions in Baghdad recently, is the war nearly over?

PRESIDENT BUSH: You know, I don't know whether he survived. The only thing I know is he's losing power. I know that because the Royal Marines in Basra worked so hard that the people of Basra are beginning to understand that -- a couple of things -- one, when we said we would come and stay to achieve their liberty, we meant it. That in Basra, for example, the Royal Marine -- the presence of the Royal Marines is providing enough comfort for people to begin to express their own opinions, they're beginning to realize freedom is real.

These are people in the south of Iraq that had been betrayed, tortured; had been told they were going to be free, took a risk in the past and then were absolutely hammered by the Iraqi regime. They were skeptical, they were cynical, they were doubtful. Now they believe, they're beginning to understand we're real and true. And it's happening elsewhere. Freedom is spreading south to north.

So the only thing I can tell you is that, that grip I used to describe that Saddam had around the throats of the Iraqi people are loosening. I can't tell you if all ten fingers are off the throat, but finger by finger, it's coming off. And the people are beginning to realize that. It's important for the Iraqi people to continue to hear this message: We will not stop until they are free. Saddam Hussein will be gone. It might have been yesterday, I don't know. But he'll be gone and they just need to know that, because we're not leaving. And not only that, they need to hear the message that we're not leaving after he's gone, until they are ready to run their own government.

I hear a lot of talk here about how we're going to impose this leader or that leader. Forget it. From day one, we have said the Iraqi people are capable of running their own country. That's what we believe. The position of the United States of America is, the Iraqis are plenty capable of running Iraq. And that's precisely what is going to happen.

Q Picking up if I could, just on that last point for both of you, have you agreed whether the United Nations will have any role in selecting the interim Iraqi authority? Or will that be entirely for the coalition?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Yes, I mean, when we say vital role for the United Nations, we mean vital role for the United Nations in all aspects of the issue -- whether it be humanitarian aid, or whether it be helping to stand up an interim authority. The Iraqi people will decide who's on the Iraqi -- the interim authority. The interim authority is a transition quasi-government until the real government shows up; until the conditions are right for the people to elect their own leadership. And the United Nations will have a vital role.

When we say vital role, that's precisely what we mean -- that they will be involved, along with the coalition, in helping to stand up an interim authority. But the Iraqi people are responsible for who's on that authority. And Tony can describe what's happening in Basra. He might describe some of the meetings that are taking place as leadership begins to emerge.

It is a -- it is a cynical world that says it's impossible for the Iraqis to run themselves. It is a cynical world which condemns Iraq to failure. We refuse to accept that. We believe that the Iraqi people are capable, talented, and will be successful in running their own government.

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: I agree with all that, as you would expect. (Laughter.) And can I just make this further point to you, the one thing that is interesting is that as people in Iraq realize that Saddam and his regime are going, as they realize that, they are coming out. And it's not that they're welcoming us because they're welcoming foreign troops. They're welcoming the fact of their liberation, from a regime the more we know about it, the more brutal, repressive, tyrannical we see its character. And therefore, these people, given a chance, already now they're in discussion with our people inside Basra -- people coming forward, people talking about those who have got support within the local community.

Iraq -- it's not just that it's right that Iraq is run by Iraqi people; they want the chance to run their own country. They haven't wanted to be under the yoke of tyranny for all these decades. The reason you have this incredibly tyrannical, repressive security apparatus was in order to suppress the proper feelings of the people there.

Now, of course, we're going to work with everyone -- we'll work with the U.N., we'll work with everyone in order to bring this about. But if I can just make this point to your point -- the important thing is not to get into some battle about words of the precise role here or there; but let's all work together internationally -- the coalition forces, the international community together -- to do what we really should be doing, which is making sure that that will of the Iraqi people is properly expressed in institutions that in the end they own, not any outside power or authority.

And I think if we keep that vision in our minds, then we'll get this right. And rather than having a sort of, you know, endless diplomatic wrangles over it, let's all just agree that the basic things that the Iraqi people want is they want to have a country where they are able to exploit their own wealth for their own prosperity, where they have basic protection of human rights, and where they have a government genuinely representative of Iraqi people -- of the full diversity of Iraqi people.

And I think what the President's just said there is so true, that -- I can't tell you how many times people have said to me in these situations, well, the outside world doesn't really understand, somehow these people who are living under these types of tyrannies really -- that's the way they live. That's not the way they want to live. It's the way they're forced to live. Give them a chance to live freely, and they will live freely.

Steve.

Q Mr. President, what is -- what exactly is the vital role for the U.N. that you both mentioned? How do you explain what is a vital role? And are we going to see the same U.N. debate over postwar Iraq that we saw before the war?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Well, I view a vital role as a agent to help people live freely. That's a vital role. That means food, that means medicine, that means aid, that means a place where people can give their contributions, that means suggesting people for the IIA, that means being a party to the progress being made in Iraq. That's what that means. And I want to thank Kofi Annan for naming a personal representative to the process yesterday. It is a positive step.

We have said all along there needs to be a role for the United Nations. We said so in the Azores. We will keep repeating it. And evidently there's some skepticism here in Europe about whether or not I mean what I say. Saddam Hussein clearly knows I mean what I say. And when, you know, we -- and people in Iraq will know we mean what we say when we talk about freedom. And a vital role for the United Nations means a vital role for the United Nations.

PRIME MINISTER BLAIR: Absolutely. And there is no reason whatever why we need to go back into the wrangles we had over, you know, the so-called second resolution. If people keep in mind the key objective -- which is the well-being of the Iraqi people -- whatever -- the past is the past. But this country is in the process of being liberated if they keep in mind the well-being of the Iraqi people, then I think -- I think we all then share a responsibilities to make that objective be fulfilled in terms of what the Iraqi people want, in terms of their democratic rights, in terms of their prosperity, in terms of their freedom. And with goodwill and common sense, I'm sure it can be done.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you. I appreciate you.

END 11:34 A.M. (Local)

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