

The White House
President George W. Bush

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For Immediate Release
Office of the Press
August 8, 2003

**President Bush, Secretary Rumsfeld Discuss
Progress in Iraq**

Remarks by the President and Secretary of Defense
Donald Rumsfeld in Press Availability
Prairie Chapel Ranch
Crawford, Texas

President's Remarks

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11:47 A.M. CDT

THE PRESIDENT: We've had a fascinating discussion on a variety of subjects with Secretary Rumsfeld and Chairman Dick Myers; of course, the Vice President is here. As an aside, the Vice President and I went fishing, we threw our first lure at about 6:20 a.m., this morning. Looks like -- turns out the fish like cooler weather than hot weather, probably the press corps feels the same way.

Turns out this is our hundredth day since major military operations have ended, ended in Iraq. And since then, we've made good progress. Iraq is more secure. The economy of Iraq is beginning to improve. I was interested to note that banks are now opening up and the infrastructure is improving. In a lot of places, the infrastructure is as good as it was at pre-war levels, which is satisfactory, but it's not the ultimate aim. The ultimate aim is for the infrastructure to be the best in the region. And the political process is moving toward democracy, which is a major shift of system in that part of the world.

And we're pleased with the progress, but we know we've got a lot more work to do. And the Secretary was briefing me on the ongoing security operations and the status of our forces. I can say, and I think he can say, progress is being made, not only in Iraq, but in Afghanistan, as well.

And then we spent time making sure that our military is configured in such a way as to represent the modern era -- which means it will be more likely that the world will be peaceful; a modern, strong, light, active military will make it easier to keep the peace, and, after all, that's the objective of the administration, is to promote freedom and peace. And the Secretary and his team are doing a really good job for the American people.

Welcome back to the ranch, Mr. Secretary, we're thrilled you're here.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Thank you, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: We'll be glad to answer a few questions. Let's start with the wires, of course.

Q Thanks, Mr. President. You talked about progress, but there's some unfinished business in Iraq,

also.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes --

Q No Saddam --

THE PRESIDENT: -- that's what I also said, we've got more to do.

Q To be specific, no Saddam, no weapons, 56 soldiers have died in this hundred days --

THE PRESIDENT: Right.

Q -- including one last night. What can you tell the American people about how many more soldiers will die? And, also, your commander in Iraq said yesterday: two years, absolute minimum. Is that an assessment you share?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, we suffer when we lose life. I mean, our country is a country that grieves with those who sacrifice and our heartfelt sympathies and appreciation go to the loved ones of any soldier who's willing to defend the security of the United States -- and that's what they're doing in Iraq. It's very important to people to understand that this is a part of the war on terror, that we're dealing with terrorists today.

We learned a lesson on September the 11th, and that is, our nation is vulnerable to attack. And we're doing everything we can to protect the homeland by making the homeland defense department effective and securing the borders. But the best way to secure America is to get the enemy before they get us. And that's what's happening in Iraq. And we're grateful for the sacrifices of our soldiers.

I said, Scott, right after September the 11th, that this war on terror is a different kind of war, and it's going to take a while to win the war on terror. However long it takes to win the war on terror, this administration is committed to doing that, because our most solemn obligation is the protection of the American people.

And as I said, the Secretary and I discussed what's happening inside of Iraq and we've got a lot of brave soldiers, slowly but surely demolishing the elements of the Baathist regime, those foreign terrorists who feel like they can use Iraq as a place to arm up and inflict casualty or perhaps gain strength to come and attack Americans elsewhere.

We've been there a hundred days. We've made a lot of progress in a hundred days, and I am pleased with the progress we've made, but fully recognize we've got a lot more work to do.

Do you want to add to that, Mr. Secretary?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: No, sir. (Laughter.)

Q Should people expect two more years, at least?

THE PRESIDENT: You know, the American people should suspect that this administration will do what is necessary to win the war on terror. That's my pledge to the American people. They have got to understand that I will not forget the lessons of September the 11th. And those lessons are loud and clear: that there are people who want to inflict harm on the American people. We lost 3,000-plus on that fateful day. And, you know, I made the pledge to the American people and the families and those who grieved that we will hunt down the terrorists wherever they are and bring them to justice. And that's what we're going to do.

Steve.

Q What do you think of Arnold Schwarzenegger and would you consider campaigning for him?

THE PRESIDENT: I will never arm wrestle Arnold Schwarzenegger. (Laughter.) No matter how hard I try, I'll never lift as much weight as he does.

I think it's interesting. You know, I'm a follower of American politics. I find what's going on in the state of California very interesting and I'm confident the citizens of California will sort all this out for the good of the citizenry.

Q Would he be a good governor?

THE PRESIDENT: As I say, I'm interested in the process. It's fascinating to see who's in and who's out -- and, yes, I think he'd be a good governor.

Q Mr. President, there are reports today that Israel is willing, perhaps, to re-route the security fence it's been building. Is that enough of a concession by the Israelis, or should they abandon construction of the fence altogether?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, Dick, let me put the fence and these issues into a larger perspective, if I might. In order for a Palestinian state to emerge, a couple of things must happen. First, the Palestinians, the people in the neighborhood must deal with terror, must rout out those who would like to destroy the process.

The fence, by the way, is a reaction to days when there were terror. I've said the fence is a problem because the fence is, you know -- kind of meanders around the West Bank, which makes it awfully hard to develop a contiguous state over time. And so I've said we have talked to the Israelis, and we are, about the fence. But we must have the fence in the context of the larger issue, and the larger issue is, will the conditions be such that a state can emerge? It's important for a Palestinian state to emerge, in our judgment, because the world will be more peaceful, Israel will be more secure and more -- or, as importantly, the Palestinians will have hope.

But all parties must work against those who would make it very difficult to achieve the vision.

Q Are you regarding it as a step forward, a sign of progress?

THE PRESIDENT: Look, the Israelis are willing to work with us. They've said, we'd consult -- we're consulting. In order for there to be the progress that needs to be made, there needs to be security. The fence was a reaction to -- in some ways, a reaction to the days of the intifada. And the more secure Israel feels, the more likely there will be a peaceful state. The more secure the region is, the more likely institutions necessary for the development of a Palestinian state will emerge.

And so on all these issues, we'll deal, of course, with both parties. We're staying very active, Ambassador Wolf is doing a fine job there. But it's important to put all these issues in the larger context of what is necessary to achieve what we think -- what I think will be great for the region, that is a peaceful Palestinian state.

Larry.

Q Mr. President, you've given us an update on Iraq and progress in the stabilization there. At this point, are you able to give us even a ballpark estimate of what it may cost, say, in the next fiscal year? And will Americans be the ones who bear most of the cost of that?

THE PRESIDENT: Two points there. One, we generally don't do our estimates on the back of an envelope. In other words, by that I mean, the commanders in the field will be dealing with the Secretary of Defense. Jerry Bremer will be bringing recommendations. And, of course, we'll go to the Congress in order to fund any requests. And the requests will be well thought out, based upon some variables. And one of the key variables is how much money we can get other nations to contribute to the reconstruction efforts of Iraq, or how many other nations are willing to contribute forces.

So, therefore, this is a -- you know, the budgeting process is one that's ongoing. It's an iterative process, I guess is the best way to put it. Iterative is the right word, you think?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Yes.

Q Is it too fluid, then? I mean, you're saying, because until we know how many people are going to help --

THE PRESIDENT: No, at some point in time -- no, let me -- no, it's fluid up to a point, but obviously we're going to have to make a request. And when we do, it will be a request based upon sound judgment. It will be a well-thought-out request. It will be one where the Congress will be able to ask legitimate questions like you're asking, and will be answered. And they're now in the process of coming up with a -- the basis for a request to the United States Congress.

I remember, by the way, the initial stages of the war in Iraq. And the questions were, how long is it going to take. I think it kind of echoes the question that Scott asked: How long will you be there? How long will it take? And I can remember saying: As long as necessary. Remember? I don't know if you remember the offensive stage of the war. You were doing an interesting job of trying to get us to make

absolute predictions. What is necessary is to achieve an overall strategy -- and whatever it takes to achieve the strategy, this administration is committed to.

Q But, you know, going into that, sir, you actually gave a pretty accurate prediction of what that would cost.

THE PRESIDENT: Going into it -- right, and we'll give you an accurate projection of what it's going to cost next year, at the appropriate time. But also going into it, there was the timetable question, which also relates to spending. And that is: why won't you tell us how long it's going to take? My answer was, how long -- however necessary is how long it will take.

And that's the way we feel now. And we are working hard to bring other nations to bear responsibility in Iraq. I want to say something about Afghanistan. Germany has taken a very active role in Afghanistan and we're very thankful for that. As NATO steps forward, Germany has assumed a big responsibility. And we really appreciate the German participation. And the reason I bring that up is, is that that's a change from six months ago. And not only is Germany's participation important, it's robust, more robust than we would have anticipated. I look forward to thanking Chancellor Schroeder for that.

And, Larry, the point there is, is that things do change. And we will have a budget that is as accurate as it can possibly be when we go to the Congress, because we understand the questions our planners and operators will receive. And they will come with good sound data.

Dana, then Mark. We've got to get in before we have a heat stroke. (Laughter.) Before you have a heat stroke. (Laughter.)

Q Mr. President, for you and for Secretary Rumsfeld, please. Secretary Rumsfeld, did you authorize Pentagon officials to hold some secret talks with Iran-Contra figure Manucher Ghoreanifar, in order to push for a regime change in Iran? And Mr. President, do you think that's a good idea, and is the new policy official policy, regime change in Iran?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: I had not had a chance to see these articles -- or an article, that I guess exists. I did get briefed by Condi and Larry DiRita here a minute ago. And my understanding is that some -- one or two Pentagon people were approached by some people who had information about Iranians that wanted to provide information to the United States government, that a meeting did take place -- this is more than a year ago -- that such a meeting did take place and the information was moved around the interagency process to all the departments and agencies. And it dropped. That is to say, the -- as I understand it, there wasn't anything there that was of substance or of value that needed to be pursued further.

Q But it's your understanding that this wasn't intended to sort of go around any other talks that have been going on, these are unofficial talks with the Iranians?

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: Oh, absolutely not. I mean, every one on the interagency process, I'm told, was apprised of it. And it went nowhere. It was just -- this happens, of course, frequently, people come in offering suggestions or information or possible contacts and sometimes they are pursued.

Obviously, if it looks as though something might be interesting, it's pursued. If it isn't, it isn't.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we support the aspirations of those who desire freedom in Iran.

Mark.

Q Mr. President, what's your response to the Democrats, including Al Gore yesterday, and some of the Democratic presidential candidates, who say that the American people were misled in advance of the war about the reasons for going to war -- that you said, disarming Iraq was the main purpose, but since then, no weapons of mass destruction have been found?

THE PRESIDENT: I say it's pure politics.

Listen, thank you all. Have a beautiful day.

Q Do you want to say more than that?

THE PRESIDENT: No, it's just pure politics. We've got a lot of people running for President and it's pure politics. The American people know that we laid out the facts, we based the decision on sound intelligence and they also know we've only been there for a hundred days. And we're making progress. A free Iraq is necessary for a -- is an integral part of the war on terror. And as far as all this political noise, it's going to get worse as time goes on, and I fully understand that. And that's just the nature of democracy. Sometimes pure politics enters into the rhetoric.

Thank you, all.

Q One on Germany? Do you think that signals a shift that Europe might be coming around to helping out in Iraq now?

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, I think that we're getting -- I mean, look, Great Britain has been helping out in Iraq for a long period of time. Poland has been helping out in Iraq. I mean, we've got a lot of people helping out in Iraq. And I thought that the German decision in Afghanistan was an important decision. And we're grateful for that.

Listen, thank you, all.

Q Would you mind if I just asked about the meeting you had?

THE PRESIDENT: Sure, go ahead and ask about the meeting.

Q I mean, I know that's unusual, but --

THE PRESIDENT: Beautiful meeting. (Laughter.)

Q But, you know, are you now satisfied that maybe after reviewing our force strength that American forces are not stretched too thin by the war on terrorism or maybe potentially could be down the road?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm satisfied.

SECRETARY RUMSFELD: We discussed that in the meeting. And it's a fair question. Needless to say, when you have a spike in activity, a crisis in Iraq, it is important to review those questions. Dick Myers and his folks in the military review them continuously.

We have found there are literally two or three -- well, about two dozen things we can do that we reduce stress on the force. And the cost of adding end strength is significant. The time it takes to bring them in, recruit them, train them, equip them means there is a significant lag. So it's not something one does quickly. And as a result, we've got a major effort going on to take advantage of all the things we can do to increase the kinds of ways we can relieve that stress on the force. And it looks to me like we're going to be able to do that.

And on the other hand, our country can afford to pay for forces at the level that can help defend and protect us. And to the extent at any point it looks as though an end strength increase is appropriate, we obviously would recommend it, but we certainly don't see the evidence of that at the present time.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you.

Q Any new hundred-degree club members?

THE PRESIDENT: Yesterday we added one.

Q Do we know him?

THE PRESIDENT: A Secret Service agent.

Q Are you going running today?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I'm not.

Q Did Dick Cheney catch anything?

THE PRESIDENT: Dick Cheney is a great fly fisherman. (Laughter.)

THE VICE PRESIDENT: But not a member of the hundred-degree club. (Laughter.)

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