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For Immediate Release  
Office of the Press Secretary  
September 14, 2004

## President's Remarks to the General Conference of the National Guard Association of the United States

Las Vegas Convention Center  
Las Vegas, Nevada

12:13 P.M. PDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all. Thanks for the warm welcome. I am glad to join you here in Nevada. I'm also honored to be up here with the Governor. He said to remind you of an important thing here. He said, what happens in Vegas -- (laughter) -- stays in Vegas. (Laughter and applause.) I hope you've enjoyed yourself in this fantastic part of our country. I'm honored to be invited to the 126th national conference. It's a pleasure to be with the brave men and women of the National Guard.

As the General just said, you've had many famous Americans in your ranks, including men named Jefferson, Madison, Lincoln and Truman. Nineteen individuals have served both in the Guard and as President of the United States, and I am proud to be one of them. (Applause.)

The men and women -- the men and women of the National Guard are deployed around the world today, fighting the forces of terror in Afghanistan and Iraq, and helping Americans threatened with natural disasters, like hurricanes here at home. I am proud to be their Commander-in-Chief, and I respect and honor all of those who serve in the United States Armed Forces -- active, Guard, and Reserve. (Applause.)

I want to thank General Hargett for his leadership. I appreciate your for your invitation. I want to thank the Governor. I want to thank the Lieutenant Governor. I want to thank the Attorney General, Brian Sandoval. I want to thank the Secretary of State, Dean Heller, for joining us today. It's a pretty important group when you get that many politicians here in one room. (Laughter.) I thank General Blum, General Harrison. I thank my fellow Texan, Danny James, General James. (Applause.) General Schultz. I want to thank the leadership and convention delegates. Most of all, thank you for inviting me today.

When I landed, by the way, at the airport, I had the honor of meeting Theresa Bunker. She is a volunteer with the Las Vegas National Guard Family Support Center. I met her brave son -- he just came back from Iraq. I like to tell people the strength of this country is in the hearts and souls of our citizens -- people like Theresa, who have taken time out of her life to volunteer, provide support for family members, to send care packages overseas. No, we're going to keep our military strong -- but never forget, the strength of this country are the great citizens of America who serve this country one heart and one soul at a time. (Applause.)

The Guard has been fighting for America since before America was a nation. From its birth in the 1630s, the Guard protected the early colonists and helped win the War on Independence. Today, each of you carries on the great tradition of those early citizen-soldiers, who picked up muskets to defend our freedom. Weapons have changed, and so have our enemies, but one thing remains the same: The men and women of the Guard stand ready to put on the uniform and fight for America. Our country is stronger, our freedom more secure because each of you has volunteered to serve. (Applause.)

You have taken an oath to stand by America in times of crisis, war and emergency. You're fulfilling that oath

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in many ways. Across the state of Florida -- I happen to know the Commander-in-Chief of the Guard there -- (laughter) -- thousands of Guard members have mobilized in response to Hurricanes Charley and Frances. They are helping to control traffic, provide security, conduct search and rescue operations, and distribute food and water. One resident of Punta Gorda, Florida put it, "I don't know what this town would have done without the National Guard." When tragedy strikes, Americans can always count on the Guard. (Applause.)

When tragedy came on September the 11th, 2001, the response of the Guard was outstanding. A thousand Guard volunteers came forward to help that day, and by sunrise on September the 12th, more than 5,000 Guard volunteers were on the job. In the past three years, Guard units have defended the American homeland against further attack -- you've taken the battle to our enemies abroad. The National Guard has played a critical role in every aspect of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. More than 185,000 Guard members have been called up to serve on every front in the war on terror. You are a vital part of our strategy to defend America. You're fighting terrorist enemies in Iraq and Afghanistan, and across the globe, so we do not have to face them here at home. (Applause.) America is safer because of your service, and we are grateful. (Applause.)

And we are grateful for your families, who share in your sacrifice. There are few things more difficult in life than seeing a loved one go off to war. When the call to duty comes, your families miss you and they worry about you. By standing behind you, they also serve our country. America is grateful for the service and sacrifice of our Guard families. (Applause.)

Your service would not be possible without the understanding and support of your employers. In offices, and schools, and factories, and hospitals across this country, businesses do without your talents so that you can serve our nation. Employers across this country are supporting the Guard, because they know the -- because they know the stakes in this war are high. These companies are showing their patriotism, and they, too, have the gratitude of our country. (Applause.)

I know this time of call-ups, and alerts, and mobilizations, and deployments has been difficult for Guard members and their families and employers. And when our nation must call on you, we owe you some things in return. We're working to provide you at least 30 days notification before you're mobilized, so you have time to make arrangements. We're working to give you as much certainty as possible about the length of your mobilization -- you deserve to know when you can expect to resume civilian life. We're working to minimize the number of extensions and repeat mobilizations, by moving forces out of low-demand specialties, such as heavy artillery, and increasing the number of available troops with skills that are in high-demand -- such as military police, civil affairs, and special operations.

We're improving benefits and the quality of life for our nation's citizen-soldiers. My administration has spent almost \$14 billion for construction, maintenance and support for Guard and Reserve facilities across the United States. We have expanded health care benefits for Guard and Reserve forces and their family members, giving them access to the military's TRICARE system for up to 90 days before they report and 180 days after deactivation -- and I will ask Congress to make that expansion permanent. (Applause.)

I called upon Congress to increase the monthly educational benefit for Guard and Reserve forces mobilized for more than 90 days in the war on terror by 40 to 80 percent, depending on the length of their mobilization. Congress must pass this piece of legislation. (Applause.) This administration stands for the Guard and its family. And we do so because we need the service of Guardsmen and women, because of the times we live in. These are dangerous times. My most solemn duty as the President is to protect the American people. If America shows uncertainty and weakness in this decade, the world will drift toward tragedy. This is not going to happen on my watch. (Applause.)

Since that terrible morning three years ago, America has been at war. We fought the terrorists across the earth -- not for pride, not for power, but because the lives of our citizens are at stake. Our strategy is clear: we're defending the homeland, we're transforming our military, we're strengthening our intelligence services. We're staying on the offensive. We will strike the terrorists abroad so they can't come here and hurt us. (Applause.) We will advance liberty in the broader Middle East and around the world, because freedom will bring a future of hope and peace we all long for. And we will prevail. (Applause.)

Our strategy is succeeding. Four years ago, Afghanistan was the home base of al Qaeda, Pakistan was a transit point for terrorist groups, Saudi Arabia was fertile ground for terrorist fundraising, Libya was secretly

pursuing nuclear weapons, Iraq was a gathering threat, and al Qaeda was largely unchallenged as it planned attacks. Because we acted, the government of a free Afghanistan is fighting terror, Pakistan is capturing terrorist leaders, Saudi is making raids and arrests, Libya is dismantling its weapons programs, the army of a free Iraq is fighting for freedom, and more than three-quarters of al Qaeda's key members and associates have been detained or killed. (Applause.) We have led, many have joined, and America and the world are safer. (Applause.)

All this progress involved careful diplomacy, clear moral purpose, and some tough decisions. And the toughest came on Iraq. We knew Saddam Hussein's record of aggression and support for terror. Remember, he housed Abu Nidal -- he's the guy that killed Leon Klinghoffer -- housed him and his associates. Zarqawi was in and out of Baghdad. He's the fellow who cuts people's heads off and hopes we cringe and shirk our duty. Saddam paid the families of suicide bombers. We knew his long history of pursuing, and even using, weapons of mass destruction. And we know that after September the 11th, our country must think differently. We must take threats seriously, before they fully materialize. (Applause.)

In Saddam Hussein, we saw a threat. So I went to the United States Congress. Members of both political parties -- including my opponent and his running mate -- looked at the same intelligence, remembered the same history we remembered, and concluded that Saddam Hussein was a threat and they authorized the use of force. Before the Commander-in-Chief commits troops into harm's way, we must try all avenues to deal with the threat. I was hopeful that diplomacy would work, that why I went to the United Nations.

The U.N. Security Council looked at the same intelligence we looked at, remembered the same history we remembered, and came to this conclusion. They said to Saddam Hussein by a 15 to nothing vote in the U.N. Security Council: disclose, disarm or face serious consequences. As he had for over a decade, Saddam Hussein ignored the demands of the world. Matter of fact, when they sent inspectors into his country, he systematically deceived them. It was clear to me diplomacy wasn't working. So I had a choice to make: Do I forget the lessons of September the 11th and take the word of a madman -- or take action necessary to defend America? Given that choice, I will defend America every time. (Applause.)

Because we acted -- because we acted to defend our country, more than 50 million people in Afghanistan and Iraq are free. It wasn't all that long ago that many young girls weren't allowed to go to school in Afghanistan, because of the dark vision of the Taliban. Wasn't all that long ago that the moms were taken to a sports stadium and executed because they wouldn't toe the line of these barbaric people.

And today, over 10 million Afghanistan citizens -- 41 percent of whom are women -- are registered to vote in the upcoming presidential elections. (Applause.) Despite ongoing violence in Iraq, that country now has a strong Prime Minister, a national council, and national elections are scheduled in January. The world is changing for the better. Our nation is standing with the people of Afghanistan and Iraq, because when America gives its word, America must keep its word. (Applause.)

We're also serving a vital and historic cause that'll make our country safer. Free societies in the Middle East will be hopeful societies, which no longer feed resentments and breed violence for export. Free governments in the Middle East will fight terrorists instead of harboring them, and that helps us keep the peace. So our mission in Afghanistan and Iraq is clear: We'll help new leaders to train their armies, move toward elections, and get on the path of stability and democracy as quickly as possible. And then our troops will return home with the honor they deserve. (Applause.)

I have made a pledge to those who wear the uniform that they will have the resources and the tools they need to do their jobs. That's why I went to the United States Congress last September and requested \$87 billion for vital funding -- funding for our troops in harm's way, funding for those who wear the uniform of America in Afghanistan and Iraq. I was pleased with the overwhelming bipartisan support for this important funding request. Matter of fact, the support was so strong, that only 12 members of the United States Senate voted against it. Two of whom are my opponent and his running mate.

They asked him why and he said: Well, I actually did vote for the \$87 billion, before I voted against it. Then they said, well, they pressed him for it, he said he was proud of his vote. And finally he said the whole thing was a complicated matter. There's nothing complicated about supporting our troops in combat. (Applause.)

Last week -- last week my opponent questioned the cost of our operations in Iraq, and said the money could have been better spent elsewhere. The problem is, just last summer he had a completely different view. Asked whether he believed we should reduce funding for operations in Iraq, my opponent at the time replied: No. I think we should increase it. Asked by how much, he said: By whatever number of billion dollars it takes to win; it is critical that the United States of America be successful in Iraq.

What's critical is that the President of the United States speak clearly and consistently at this time of great threat in our world, and not change positions because of expediency or pressure. Our troops, our friends and allies, and our enemies must know where America stands -- and that America will stand firm. (Applause.) We cannot waver -- we cannot waver because our enemies will not waver. As we saw with such horror on September the 11th, as the people of Russia saw in the terrible massacre of innocent children there, we are up against people who show no shame, no remorse, no hint of humanity -- and we must confront them clearly and consistently -- not just some of the time, but all of the time. (Applause.)

Our troops understand the importance of our mission. Sergeant Bob Kells returned from Iraq a few months ago, where he was deployed with the Rhode Island National Guard. "We saw what [Saddam Hussein] did to these people," he says. "We saw the graves. The people would lead us to them. [Now] they're free. They never had that before. And we did it for them." He says of the insurgents and terrorists we are fighting in Iraq today, "they want us out. But they're a minority. The Iraqi people want democracy. The [insurgents] are absolute cowards. They fight behind women and children -- but better fighting them there, than over here."

Sergeant Kells is correct. Our mission in Iraq is critical. And our men and women in uniform -- active, Guard, and Reserve -- are doing a superb job for America. (Applause.) Because of your service and sacrifice, we're defeating the terrorists where they live, and that makes us safer. Because of you, women in Afghanistan are no longer shot and whipped in public. Because of you, the people of Iraq no longer fear being executed and left in mass graves. Because of you, the world is more just and more peaceful. (Applause.)

Others are helping us. We put together alliance to help us in the cause of freedom and peace. There's nearly 40 nations involved in Afghanistan, and some 30 nations involved in Iraq. I'll continue to work with our allies and friends, but I will never turn over America's national security decisions to leaders of other countries. (Applause.)

I believe in the transformational power of liberty. The wisest use of American strength is to advance freedom. One of the people with whom I've spent a lot of time is Prime Minister Koizumi, of Japan. We're friends. We talk a lot. It's amazing, though, to be having these discussions with Prime Minister Koizumi, because it wasn't all that long ago in the march of history that we were at war with Japan. They were a sworn enemy. My dad, I suspect others' dads and granddads fought against the Japanese.

But because of people like Harry Truman and other Americans, after World War II, people who understood that liberty could transform an enemy into an ally, because they doubted -- they overcame the doubters, because they worked to build a democracy in Japan, today I sit down at the table with Prime Minister Koizumi, talking about the peace. Liberty is powerful. Liberty can change nations. Some day, an American President will be sitting down with a duly elected leader of Iraq, talking about the peace and our children and grandchildren will be better off for it. (Applause.)

I believe that millions in the Middle East plead in silence for their liberty. I believe that if given the chance, they will embrace the most honorable form of government ever devised by man. I believe this because freedom is not America's gift to the world -- freedom is the Almighty God's gift to each man and woman in this world. (Applause.)

For all Americans, these years in our history will always stand apart. There are quiet times in the life of a nation, when little is expected of leaders. This isn't one of those times. This is a time when we need firm resolve, clear vision, and deep faith in the values that make us a great nation.

None of us will ever forget that week when one era ended and another began. Three years ago today, on September the 14th, 2001, I stood in the ruins of the Twin Towers. It's a day I'll never forget. There were workers in hard hats there yelling at me at the top of their lungs: Whatever it takes. I was trying to do my best to console and thank the rescuers. A guy grabbed me by the arm, he looks me straight in the eye and

he says: Do not let me down. I wake up every morning thinking about how to better protect America. I will never relent in defending our country, whatever it takes. (Applause.)

And I know -- and I know that is your commitment, as well. You've shown it by your commitment to service, your standards of honor and your performance of duty. America's citizen soldiers reflect great credit on our military, and on our country. And I am here to thank you for your service.

May God bless you, and may God continue to bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

END 12:42 P.M. PDT

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