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PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH



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For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
September 22, 2005

President Discusses War on Terror and Hurricane Preparation

The Pentagon

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11:57 A.M. EDT


VIDEO Multimedia

President's Remarks

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THE PRESIDENT: I appreciate being back at the Pentagon. I just finished a briefing with Secretary Rumsfeld and General Myers, and, obviously, members of my national security team, along with Generals Abizaid and Casey and Ambassador Khalilzad from the Middle East, via videoconferencing. We got an update on the wide range of missions being carried out by our Armed Forces.

Before we talk about the briefings and our war on terror, I do want to thank the leadership here in the Pentagon, Secretary Rumsfeld and others, as well as all our folks who wear the uniform for their help in the aftermath of Katrina. We have more than 50,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, including thousands of National Guardsmen and Reservists, all on the ground helping the people there. These good folks showed great capacity and compassion for our fellow citizens who hurt. They saved a lot of lives. On behalf of a grateful nation, I thank them for their service.



We now got another hurricane coming, Hurricane Rita. This morning I met with Secretary Chertoff about Rita. I talked to Governor Perry again. I talked to him last night, I talked to him this morning. This is a big storm, and it's really important for our citizens there on the Texas coast to follow the instructions of the local authorities. Officials at every level of government are preparing for the worst. Our Armed Forces have prepositioned troops. We have resources there to help the federal, state and local officials to respond swiftly and effectively.

As we meet our responsibilities in dealing with these two significant storms, Katrina and Rita, our focus on defending our country remains undiminished. Today General Abizaid delivered a detailed brief on the global war on terror, with particular attention on the major battlefronts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In Afghanistan, we have nearly 18,000 American troops who continue to serve as part of a coalition that has made extraordinary progress in delivering freedom and security to the people of that proud nation. This past Sunday, the Afghan people took another vital step toward democracy by electing representatives to their provincial councils and the National Assembly. President Karzai described the moment this way: "After 30 years of wars and interventions and occupation and misery, today Afghanistan is moving forward." And that's positive news for the world.

I mention Afghanistan is not yet complete. The international community is helping Afghanistan become a lasting democracy. There's still terrorists who seek to overthrow the young government. See, they want to

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return Afghanistan to what it was under the Taliban, a miserable place, a place where citizens have no rights, women are oppressed, and the terrorists have a safe haven to plan and plot attacks. And that's why coalition forces and our special forces and Afghan forces are conducting precision raids against high-value targets in southeastern Afghanistan. Our country will stand with the Afghan people as they secure their freedom and become an ally in the war on terror.

As we work to help defeat the enemies of a democratic Afghanistan we're also working to defeat the enemies of a democratic Iraq. General Casey briefed us about a comprehensive strategy to achieve victory in Iraq. We're going to deny the terrorists a safe haven to plot their attacks. We'll continue to train more Iraqi forces to assume increasing responsibility for basic security operations. Our forces will focus on hunting down high-value targets like the terrorist, Zarqawi. We'll continue working with Iraqis to bring all communities into the political process. Together we'll help Iraq become a strong democracy that protects the rights of its people and is a key ally in the war on terror.



General Abizaid and General Casey extensively talked about how we're going to achieve this victory. The terrorists are concentrated in four of Iraq's 18 provinces. Over the last several months, terrorists have continued to launch suicide attacks and assassinate Iraqis who are working to improve their country. The number of attacks has increased, particularly in the last week, as the terrorists have begun their campaign to stop a referendum on the constitution.

See, they don't care who they kill; they just kill. They kill innocent people. They kill women. They kill children. They kill election workers. And they've had a history of this before. They've had a history of escalating their attacks before Iraq's major political milestones, like the handover of sovereignty in 2004, the free elections this past January, and the drafting of the constitution over the summer.

Recently, Zarqawi, the terrorist, the killer, has called for a total war on Shia Iraqis. His hope is to set off a civil war that will divide the country and derail its march to democracy. Today our commanders made it clear, as Iraqis prepare to vote on their constitution in October and elect a permanent government in December, we must be prepared for more violence.

To defeat the terrorists, we're constantly adapting to their changing tactics and conducting aggressive counterterrorism operations in the areas where they're concentrated. As more and more Iraqi security forces complete their training, they're taking on greater responsibilities in these efforts. Iraqi troops are increasingly taking the lead in joint operations. They're conducting independent operations and expanding the reach and effectiveness of American forces. The growing size and increasing capabilities of the Iraqi security forces are helping our coalition deal with a challenge we have faced since the beginning of the war. It used to be that after we cleared out a city, there were not enough qualified Iraqi troops to maintain control. And so what would happen is, is that the terrorists would wait for us to leave, and then they'd try to move back in. And sometimes, with success. Now the increasing number of more capable Iraqi troops has allowed us to hold on to the cities we have taken from the terrorists. The Iraqi troops know their people, they know their language, and they know who the terrorists are. By leaving Iraqi units in the cities we've cleaned out, we can keep the cities safe, while we move on to hunt down the terrorists in other parts of the country.

We saw the value of large and more capable Iraqi security forces in Najaf and Fallujah last year, when America and Iraqi forces conducted joint operations to clean out terrorist strongholds. We followed up these successful efforts by working with the Iraqi government to ensure that Iraqi forces were able to maintain law and order. We worked with local leaders to improve infrastructure and create jobs and provide hope. As a result, the people of Najaf and Fallujah are safer, and their cities are moving ahead with vital reconstruction. And that's part of our strategy to help develop a secure, safe democracy in Iraq.

We're seeking to repeat this success elsewhere in Iraq, most recently in the country's northwest region. This area was the main route of foreign terrorists entering Iraq from Syria and a major concern of coalition forces. During operations in the key town of Tal Afar, Iraqi security forces outnumbered U.S. forces for the first time in a major offensive operation. Our joint efforts killed, captured or flushed out hundreds of terrorists. As a part of General Casey's strategy, Iraqi forces remain in Tal Afar to ensure that the terrorists are not allowed to return, regroup and hold hostage the innocent residents of that city.

Thanks to these operations we're making it more difficult for foreign terrorists to enter through the northwest part of Iraq. Coalition and Iraqi troops are now focusing their efforts in western Iraq where we're trying to stop foreign terrorists from entering through Syria and prevent al Qaeda from establishing a safe haven in the Anbar province.

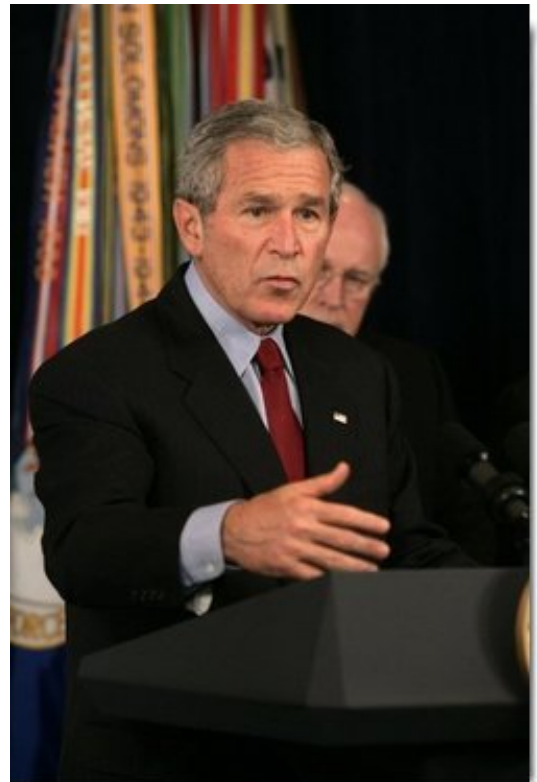
General Casey is working with his Iraqi counterparts to restore Iraqi control of this region. And when we have completed this task, elements of the Iraqi military will remain to protect Iraq's border and ensure that the enemy does not return to dominate this region and intimidate its citizens.

To ensure that we can maintain this aggressive pace the military operations through the election period, we have temporarily increased our troop levels, just as we have before other major political events. As the Iraqi security forces establish control over more and more of their country, American troops will support these forces and continue to hunt down the terrorists in the remaining problem areas.

Iraqi forces are showing the vital difference they can make. They are now in control of more parts of Iraq than at any time in the past two years. Significant areas of Baghdad and Mosul, once violent and volatile, are now more stable because Iraqi forces are helping to keep the peace.

Iraqis are providing security in Najaf and parts of Diyala province. In all these areas, the Iraqis are gathering useful intelligence. They're forging alliances with civic and religious leaders. As the Iraqi security forces show they're capable of keeping the terrorists out, they're earning the confidence of the Iraqi people and ensuring the success of a free and democratic Iraq.

Listen, there are differences of opinion about the way forward; I understand that. Some Americans want us to withdraw our troops so that we can escape the violence. I recognize their good intentions, but their position is wrong. Withdrawing our troops would make the world more dangerous, and make America less safe. To leave Iraq now would be to repeat the costly mistakes of the past that led to the attacks of September the 11th, 2001. The terrorists saw our response to the hostage crisis in Iran, the bombings in the Marine barracks in Lebanon, the first World Trade Center attack, the killing of American soldiers in Somalia, the destruction of two U.S. embassies in Africa, and the attack on the USS Cole. The terrorists concluded that we lacked the courage and character to defend ourselves, and so they attacked us.



Now the terrorists are testing our will and resolve in Iraq. If we fail that test, the consequences for the safety and security of the American people would be enormous. Our withdrawal from Iraq would allow the terrorists to claim an historic victory over the United States. It would leave our enemies emboldened and allow men like Zarqawi and bin Laden to dominate the Middle East and launch more attacks on America and other free nations. The battle lines are drawn, and there is no middle ground: either we defeat the terrorists and help the Iraqis build a working democracy, or the terrorists will impose their dark ideology on the Iraqi people and make that country a source of terror and instability to come for decades.

The only way the terrorists can win is if we lose our nerve and abandon the mission. For the security of the American people, that's not going to happen on my watch. We'll do our duty. We'll defeat our enemies in Iraq and other fronts in the war on terror. We'll lay the foundation of peace for our children and grandchildren.

Since our country was attacked on the morning of September the 11th, 2001, we have known that the war on terror would require tremendous sacrifice and commitment. Across the world, the brave men and women of our Armed Forces are taking on dangerous and difficult work. Some have given their lives in battle; they did so in a cause that is just and necessary for the security of this country. We're grateful for their service. We pray for their families they left behind. We'll honor their sacrifice by completing their mission and winning the war on terror.



I'll take a couple of questions. Nedra.

Q Mr. President --

THE PRESIDENT: Nedra.

Q Mr. President, what are you doing differently with Hurricane Rita approaching the coast that you didn't do with Hurricane Katrina, to make sure there aren't those catastrophic results?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. Well, I think one thing that's different is people understand the need to evacuate more clearly. I saw the Mayor of Galveston, Texas on TV, and she said that the people of her city seemed to have learned one of the lessons, and that is, take the evacuation orders very seriously. And so there appears to be a significant evacuation from parts of the Texas coast to get out of harm's way.

Secondly, we've got Admiral Hereth on the ground; he's a Coast Guard Admiral. He'll be Admiral Allen's counterpart in Texas. He's there in Texas ready to go.

Like Katrina, we're moving federal assets to be in position to move in. For example, the USS Iwo Jima, where we were the other day, has left New Orleans and is now tracking in behind the storm ready to bring Marines and choppers into place. But that's not really that different from Katrina. We had choppers moving very quickly. In this case, though, we're able to come in behind the storm.

As you might remember, we had equipment that was -- had to come across the land to fight through the storm to get there. This time we're going to be able to bring some assets around behind it, which I -- will help get people -- get some rescue missions there as quickly as possible.

But I think the biggest difference is people are aware of the danger of these storms, and people are responding at all levels of government.

Q Mr. President --

THE PRESIDENT: Hold on for a minute, please. Toby. I'll get you in a minute. You seem anxious to ask a question.

Q I am, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, well, just take your time.

Q Why has it been so difficult to catch bin Laden and Zarqawi? And can you really say that you are making progress in the war on terrorism when these people have been, you know, able to stay free for so long?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I can say we're making progress in the war on terror. If you look at the organizational structure of al Qaeda right after September the 11th and look at it today, you'll see a lot of people have been brought to justice -- Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, al Libbi. I mean, there's a series of these folks that had been plotting and planning and ordering attacks. And we have found them -- we being a coalition. So step one is there is a coalition. A lot of people around the world understand the stakes, that this is global war against people who've got a dark vision and a strategy to achieve that vision.

Look, let me take a step back. People have got to understand that there is a global network of terrorists who desire to dominate a part of the world. They would like to see a Taliban-type relationships in countries around the world. They want to be in a position to impose their philosophy. The best way for me to describe what life would be like is to remind people what life was like for those poor Afghan citizens under the Taliban. That's what -- in other words, they have a strategy. We understand that. And we have a strategy. And part of the strategy is to call free nations together to form a coalition, to share information and to find people before they hurt.

Now, look, they've been successful on attacks. They were successful here. They've been successful in London and Madrid. In other words, they have had attacks.

On the other hand, we've been successful at bringing them to justice and finding some of the killers before they were able to strike again. And so there has been success at bringing awareness to the international community about what we need to do. There's been success about bringing people to justice. No question that some of their leaders are still at large, isolated, however, kind of in remote parts the world. But make no mistake about it, we're doing everything we can to find them. And when we do, we'll bring them to justice.

We're now -- a part of that global war on terror is in Iraq. And the reason why is because these killers and these terrorists understand that the spread of democracy is their worst nightmare. See, democracy trumps their view of the world. Democracy trumps Taliban-type regimes, because it's free. Because when you live in a free world, you have hope.

And so that's why you're seeing him -- a guy like Zarqawi, who has become a top al Qaeda fighter -- using every tool at his disposal, primarily the ability to get on TV screens with a massive suicide bombing, the killing of innocent people. And he does so because they want us to retreat. I mean, the strategy is clear. And we're not going to let him get away with it. We will work for democracy in Iraq, we'll hunt them down, we will train Iraqi forces so they can deal with those who are disgruntled with the march to democracy.

But the war is beyond Iraq, that's what I'm trying to say to you. This is a global war. Afghanistan is a good example of progress being made. You might remember Afghanistan was the home base for the Taliban, as well as al Qaeda. And now we've got a democracy in Afghanistan and the world is better for it and safer for it.

You bet we're making progress. We've got a lot of work. And this is a long struggle. To defeat this enemy, the United States of America must understand that it's going to take -- it's going to take time, just like it took time to defeat other struggles we had, other -- to succeed in other struggles we've had, like communism, and it's going to take a while.

But what will accelerate the ability for the enemy to succeed is for the United States to lose its nerve, that's what I'm telling you.

You got a question, sir?

Q Yes, sir, thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: What might it be?

Q There is concern about the country's ability to pay for these hurricanes in the time ahead. Have you prioritized what may need to be cut?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm going to work with Congress to prioritize what may need to be cut. The other day I said that we're open-minded about offsets. What's a priority for me is to win this war on terror and secure the country, and to help the people down there to the extent that the law allows.

Q Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: Joseph.

Q Why is it taking so long to secure the border at Syria? And do you really think that the Iraqis can secure it if the U.S. troops have been unsuccessful to do it so far?

THE PRESIDENT: It takes a while to secure the border with Syria because it is a long border that has had smuggling routes in existence for decades. In order to secure a border, it requires cooperation on both sides of the border, and we're getting limited cooperation from Syria. We've made it clear to Syria we expect them to help us secure their border and to stop the transit of suiciders coming from other countries through Syria into Iraq. Their response hasn't been very satisfactory to date. I continue to remind them of their obligation.

And so it's a long border. One of the things is that we need to continue to train the Iraqis to be better controllers of the border, and that's one of the missions that General Casey briefed us on today.

Bianca. Nobody named Bianca? Well, sorry Bianca's not here. I'll be glad to answer her question.

Q I'll follow up.

THE PRESIDENT: No, that's fine. (Laughter.) Thank you though, appreciate it. Just trying to spread around the joy of asking a question.

Q How is the strategy outlined today by General Casey different from what the United States was doing in the past? What lessons would you say have been incorporated in it? And based on that, how much closer do you think we are to being able to turn over full control of the security situation?

THE PRESIDENT: It's going to be a while to turn over full control. Full control says that the Iraqis are capable of moving around the country and sharing intelligence and they got a command control system that works like ours, and that's going to be a while. Turning over some control to Iraqis is now taking place. As I told you, there are more Iraqis in the lead -- Iraqis are in the lead in this mission for the first time on a major operation.

What General Casey briefed us on was how our strategy of cleaning out the terrorists out of a city and being able to fill in behind, or leave behind Iraqi forces, is beginning to pay off. And what hadn't happened in the past was the capacity to fill that void with a capable force that would prevent the terrorists from coming back in.

Q Mr. President, could we talk more about --

THE PRESIDENT: Are you Bianca?

Q No, I'm not. Anita -- Fox News.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay.

Q Just a quick question --

THE PRESIDENT: Okay. I was looking for Bianca. I'm sorry.

Q -- more about the funding for -- with the devastation of Katrina, and so forth, and just more on -- I know you're going to meet with Congress, to talk about maybe offsets in spending.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q Can you talk a little bit more about --

THE PRESIDENT: The first thing is, we're in the process of understanding how much cost the federal government is responsible for, for Katrina, and possibly Rita. For example, we're obligated for at least -- by law, obligated for at least 75 percent of infrastructure repairs. So in order for us to be able to understand what needs to be offset, or how we work with Congress on reducing expenditures in other areas, we first have to understand the scope of the request. And so step one is to understand -- is to take inventory of the roads that we'll be responsible for repairing, the bridges we'll be responsible for repairing, the waste water sewage systems we'll be responsible for repairing, the schools we'll be responsible for repairing. And we're now in the process of inventorying the costs.

We have made a decision, for example, to send a \$2,000 check to each family that has been evacuated. We're getting a pretty good handle on the extent of that, so when we speak to Congress -- say, that's a pretty fixed amount. We understand how much that's going to be. And so what I'm telling you is, we're in the process of understanding the size and scope of the federal response, so that we can then say to Congress, here is what we anticipate over the next several years the cost will be, and here is our expectations in how we can pay for it, and here are some offsets. And we're beginning to make those kinds of suggestions.

But you have got to understand it takes a while to understand the amount of federal -- the size of the federal tab in this process. It just doesn't happen overnight. You just don't go down and look and say, oh, this is what it's going to cost. It requires an assessment, an inventorying of potential costs. And that's exactly what we're doing right now.

Another area of cost, for example, is debris removal. See, we know what our obligations are. We just, by the way, cut through a lot of red tape to allow for federal debris removal from private property if the mayors were to sign a form basically designating parts of their city to be cleared by -- private property to be cleared by the federal government. Now, we're beginning to understand what that -- how much of that territory will be cleared by the government and what our cost obligation is. And when we get those costs up, we'll be happy to share those with the United States Congress, and then work through how we can pay for all this.

Thank you all very much.

Q Mr. President, when you look at expenditures, do you have the list on the offset side?

THE PRESIDENT: No, let me make sure you understand where we're headed. It's hard to work with Congress until we fully understand the size and scope of what is going to be expected for us to pay. And so we're in the process of now gathering that information, so that when we sit at a table not guessing -- it's not going to be perfect, but it's going to have some size -- some size and scope of what we're dealing with.

Now we're going to have, by the way, have to calculate in the effects of Rita. And once we do that -- but it doesn't happen -- see, you seem to think that somehow you go down there and overnight it's clear what we owe. But it requires assessment and inventorying of -- like, for example, sewage treatment facilities. It takes a while to understand how many of those need to be repaired and what the cost will be. And that's what we're in the process of doing.

Q --without targeting expenditures, how about targeting offsets?

THE PRESIDENT: We'll work with Congress on that, of course, and -- but the point is, is that we're going to

work together and come up with a solution that will, obviously, help deal with the budget and -- but first and foremost, the federal government has got obligations by law, and I want to understand those obligations and the extent of those obligations, and as best we can, estimate the cost of those obligations.

Thank you all very much.

END 12:25 P.M. EDT

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