



THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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President Meets with Ex-POWs

4th Infantry Division Memorial Chapel
Fort Hood, Texas

11:06 A.M. CDT

THE PRESIDENT: We just had a great church service. Like thousands of our fellow citizens, we celebrated Easter. We celebrated with our family, but we also celebrated with members of the 4th Infantry Division military families. The 4th Infantry Division is in Iraq.

We are also here with two of -- brave Americans, two warrant officers, chopper pilots who were captured in Iraq and recently returned to their families. They were celebrating Easter with their loved ones: moms, dads, wives, brothers and sisters from around our country. So it was a glorious day.

We prayed for peace and for strength, for the many blessings. I am particularly grateful that these two men were with us today. I thank God for their lives. I hope all our fellow Americans realize that we live in a great country, full of great people. And today is a day to give blessings for America, as well as an Almighty and gracious God.

I'd be glad to answer a few questions.

Q Mr. President, you said you prayed for peace this morning. How soon can you tell the American people that this operation will be complete?



THE PRESIDENT: When Tommy Franks says it's complete. I'll tell you this, though, the liberation of Iraq will make the world more peaceful.

Q Mr. President, there have been some anti-U.S. demonstrations stirred up by religious leaders in Iraq. Are you worried that's going to hurt the rebuilding effort?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm not worried. Freedom is beautiful, and when people are free, they express their opinions. You know, they couldn't express their opinions before we came, now they can. I've always said democracy is going to be hard. It's not easy to go from being enslaved to being free. But it's going

to happen, because the basic instincts of mankind is to be free. They want to be free. And so, sure, there's going to be people expressing their opinions, and we welcome that, just like here in America people can express their opinion.

Q Mr. President, what is the latest that you have on the status of Saddam Hussein? And if he is not killed or captured --

THE PRESIDENT: That Saddam Hussein is no longer in power. That's for certain. He was in power, and now he is not. And, therefore, the Iraqi people's lives will be much better off. But other than that, I don't -- Stretch, we'll just have to see.

Q -- sir, any kind of a threat if he is not killed or captured?

THE PRESIDENT: If he is alive, I would suggest he not pop his head up.

Q Sir, do you expect to return more to a domestic agenda now that the war is winding down?

THE PRESIDENT: I will continue to promote an international agenda of peace and freedom, and I will continue doing what I have been doing, is working on our economy and working to modernize the Medicare system. I have always been involved with the domestic policy. I somehow get -- somewhat taken aback when I hear stories that assume I can only do one thing. I am concerned when people in our society can't find work.

And so I've been constantly promoting an aggressive jobs and growth program. I believe our Medicare system needs to be modernized. I've consistently talked about that. I look forward to working with Congress see that that's done.

Then I will continue to work to make the world a more peaceful place. The United States is a powerful country, and one of the things we ought to do is use our power to make the world more peaceful and more free. And I intend to continue to do that.

Q Sir, will talks with North Korea go ahead? And do you expect any breakthrough?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, the key thing on the North Korea agenda is that China is assuming a very important responsibility, and that is that they will confirm that which -- work toward that which Jiang Zemin told me in Crawford, right around the corner here, that China's policy is for a nuclear weapons free Peninsula. And now that they're engaged in the process, it makes it more likely that's going to occur. You've got the United States adhering to that posture, you've got China adhering to that posture; South Korea believes that the Peninsula ought to be nuclear weapons free, Japan strongly believes that. And I believe that all four of us, working together, have a good chance of convincing North Korea to abandon her ambitions to develop nuclear arsenals.

How are you, Sir. Good to see you again.

Q We've been wondering about your words of encouragement to the returnees.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, you know, they were -- first of all, they were the encouraging people. They were the ones who offered encouragement. I was, believe this or not, somewhat taken aback when I was in their presence. And these guys were so uplifting and so positive, and so obviously thrilled to be here. They got in last night at midnight. They can speak for themselves. I think you can speak for yourselves.

At least you did in my presence.

Q Sir, what are you doing this weekend around the ranch?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q What have you been doing at the ranch this weekend?

THE PRESIDENT: Exactly. (Laughter.) I'm enjoying myself.

Q Someone said home projects.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, home projects. A little fishing. Nothing better than fishing with your dad, and Barney.

Q What did Barney catch?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, Barney only caught that which I caught. (Laughter.) But worked a little brush cutting, keeping that ranch -- keeping those cedars away from those good hardwoods, letting that -- conserving my property; a little exercise, spent some time with my family and am really glad I had some time here in Crawford.

Q Did you have a chance to visit with the two pilots in the church?

THE PRESIDENT: I did, yes. And you can visit with them, too.

Q And their families, as well?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we did. We visited with their families. And I had a good talk with them. They're good, strong, men. It's an amazing experience, when you think about it. Here we are, Easter, the great -- one of the great religious holidays, and these guys arrived last night -- might have actually arrived Easter day. I don't know if it was exactly midnight, or a little after midnight.

CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER YOUNG: It was a little before midnight.

THE PRESIDENT: A little before midnight. Well, Easter eve. I was trying to make the story a little more dramatic than it really was.

Q I wondered if either of the two pilots could tell, share their experience --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, they can. Sure, they can. That's up to them. They don't have to. I have to speak to the press. They don't have to. But it's not that bad an experience. This guy's getting ready -- I'll tell you one thing about this guy, Hillman. He is going to go see his children for the first time since he was captured. He hasn't even seen his children. So if you ask him questions, don't make it long, because, see, we're holding a dad up from hugging two children.

Q Could you tell us a bit about your meeting with the President inside the church?

CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER WILLIAMS: It was an absolute honor, sir, an absolute honor.

Q -- Officer Young?

CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER YOUNG: We stand a hundred percent behind whatever our President decides to do. We're honored to serve him, and this is definitely one of the highlights of my life, absolutely.

Q Mr. President, are you getting any signs of cooperation from Syria yet?

THE PRESIDENT: There's some positive signs. They're getting the message that they should not harbor Baath Party officials, high ranking Iraqi officials. A lot of other countries have also sent that message. As you know, Secretary Powell will be going to visit with the Syrians. It seems like they're beginning to get the message. And when we think there is somebody there or know somebody is there, we of course will pass on the name and fully expect the Syrian government to hand the person over.

Q How many are there, do you have any idea, Iraqi leaders?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, obviously we felt some were there, otherwise we wouldn't have spoken out. But probably the best diplomacy is that not through the Associated Press or Reuters or Dallas Morning News or Houston Chronicle or any -- let's see, who else -- Bloomberg. But the best diplomacy is the diplomacy of having our friends, as well as ourselves, send clear messages. And we're doing that. And I'm confident the Syrian government has heard us. And I believe it when they say they want to cooperate with us.

Listen, have a wonderful day.

Q Thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, all.

MRS. BUSH: Bye, happy Easter.

Q Are you going to visit with the other POWs?

THE PRESIDENT: Today? I don't think so, Bennett. I think I'm going to head back over to the ranch. Thank you all.

END 11:18 A.M. CDT