

President Bush Holds Roundtable with Arab- and Muslim-American Leaders

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all very much. Thank you for coming. I just -- please, be seated. I had the opportunity of meeting with distinguished members of the Arab American and Muslim American communities and I want to thank you all so very much for coming to share with me your thoughts.

Like all Americans, they're proud of our country, they're proud of our military, they're proud of our allies for working together to free Afghanistan. They will never forget the joy of the Afghan people who were liberated. They appreciate the fact that we work in concert to destroy terrorist training camps in Afghanistan so that those terrorists might not hurt others. They wanted to come with me to show their solidarity with the people of Afghanistan, and to show that America has a vibrant and important and dynamic Muslim faith tradition.

I appreciate so very much Ziad, the President of the American Arab Anti-Defamation League for being here. Mr. Ambassador, thank you and your sweet wife for having us here. The Ambassador has a fabulous story. He's an American citizen, renounced his citizenship in order to become the Ambassador of Afghanistan, to serve this nation. I appreciate that, appreciate your leadership. (Applause.)

I want to thank Andrew Natsios, who is with us today, who is doing a fine job if helping people in need around the world. I want to thank -- where's Zal? There he is. Zal, thanks for coming. Zal Khalilzad is a member of the National Security Council and very much involved with our efforts to help Afghanistan.

It's important for our fellow Americans to understand that Americans of Muslim faith share the same grief that we all share from what happened to our country; that they're just as proud of America as I am proud of America; that they love our country as much as I love our country.

They share my profound belief that no American should be judged by appearance, by ethnic background, or by religious faith. I believe that strongly, and so do they.

Bigotry is not a part of our soul. It's not going to be a part of our future. Sure, there may be some, but that's not the American way, and we must reject bigotry of all kinds in this great land. In order for us to reject the evil done to America on September the 11th, we must reject bigotry in all its forms.

George Washington says, "America gives to bigotry no sanction; to persecution no assistance." And that is true today. We treasure our friendship with Muslims and Arabs around the world. One year ago, the people of Afghanistan lived under oppression. Their country was a haven for terror. Today, they're an emergency democracy -- an emerging democracy, and building a better future. And we are proud to continue to stand by them, and to stand with them.

Americans are helping the people of Afghanistan in their time of hardship and need, and we will continue to do so. The United States has committed more than \$700 million in aid to Afghanistan for food, and seeds and roads and bridges, water and sanitation systems. I was most proud of the fact that American children from all walks of life contributed to the America's Fund for Afghan Children. It was such a strong statement, of children uniting to help people in need.

All Americans must recognize that the face of terror is not the true faith -- face of Islam. Islam is a faith that brings comfort to a billion people around the world. It's a faith that has made brothers and sisters of every race. It's a faith based upon love, not hate.

As we mourn tomorrow, we must remember that our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, not a religion; that governments which support them are our enemies, not faithful Muslims who love their families, who yearn for a more peaceful and safe world for their children.

Tomorrow, Americans of all faiths will come together in a spirit of unity and remembrance and resolve. I call on every American to uphold the values of America and remember why many have come here. In our war against terror, we must never lose sight of the values that makes our country so strong; the values of respect and tolerance. The value that we believe that everybody ought to worship the Almighty, however they so choose.

Mr. Ambassador, thank you for letting me come by on the eve of this important day for our country. I'm honored to be here at your Embassy.

AMBASSADOR SHAHRYAR: Thank you very much, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: May God bless you, may God bless Afghanistan. May God continue to bless America.

I'll answer a few questions. Jennifer.

Q Yes, Mr. President, with this increased threat level, can you say what your level of concern is that Americans will be attacked again? And what is your advice to Americans in this time?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we are -- we take every threat seriously. The threats that we have heard recently remind us of the pattern of threats we heard prior to September the 11th. We have no specific threat to America, but we're taking everything seriously, obviously. And so, therefore, we have gone to a different level of concern, a different threat level, which means our government will be providing extra security at key facilities, and that we'll be increasing surveillance.

We'll do everything we can to protect the American people. And Americans need to go about their lives. They just need to know that their government, at the federal and state and local level, will be on an extra level of alert to protect us.

Heidi. You haven't asked a question in a while.

Q Thank you; I appreciate it. What do you think of French President Chirac's idea to give Hussein a three-week deadline to comply with weapons inspections or face --

THE PRESIDENT: I think -- Heidi, I think it's important that, so that you will pay attention to my speech on Thursday, that I reserve judgment about what may or may not be in my speech. (Laughter and applause.) Even got applause, you finally got a question and applause. (Laughter.)

I do -- I'll have something to say, obviously, and I look forward to speaking to that international body about -- about how best we can work together to keep the peace, how best to make the world a more peaceful place. And so I hope you understand that I'll not reveal my speech ahead of time. I know that many are trying to find out what it is, and that's your job but my job is not to answer you. (Laughter.)

Katie, ABC.

Q Sir, if you decide on a military solution to Saddam Hussein, have you resigned to go through the U.N. Security Council? Or are you determined to go it alone?

THE PRESIDENT: Katie, thank you for asking me about what's going to be in my speech tomorrow. (Laughter.)

Let me get to the U.N. and give what is an important speech for me. I'll make the case of how I think we ought to proceed, on how we work together to keep the peace.

I'm going to the United Nations to give this speech for a reason -- because I believe this is an international problem, and that we must work together to deal with the problem. And I am also very mindful of my job as the American President to do everything we can to protect the American people from future attack.

And I'm deeply concerned about a leader who has ignored all -- who ignored the United Nations for all these years, has refused to conform to resolution after resolution after resolution; who has weapons of mass destruction. And the battlefield has now shifted to America, so there's a different dynamic than we've ever faced before. And I take these threats seriously. The thing I take most seriously is my job to protect innocent life here on the homeland. And I will respond to this threat starting Thursday. And I look forward to the chance to do so.

In the meantime, tomorrow is going to be a hard day for a lot of Americans. It's going to be a day of tears and a day of prayer and a day of national resolve. It also needs to be a day in which we confirm the values which make us unique and great. And that's one of the reasons I came here today, to be with friends to assure all Americans that we will embrace those values.

So thank you all for coming. God bless. (Applause.)

END 2:25 P.M. EDT

This page was last modified on 09/10/02 00:00:00