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President Welcomes Prime Minister of Australia to the White House

The East Room

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VIDEO Multimedia

President's Remarks

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PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you all. Laura and I are honored to welcome Prime Minister John Howard and Janette back to the White House. We're really glad you're here. We're looking forward to having, this time, a true family lunch, upstairs. It's a chance to -- for two old friends, friends who happen to be old -- (laughter) -- to visit and to talk and to strategize and to think aloud about how to work together.



I got to tell you, I admire John Howard a lot. He's a man of conviction. He's got backbone. He's not afraid to make the hard decision, he's not afraid to lead. And we're really thrilled you're here. Plus, he married well. (Laughter.)

I appreciate a man of vision. I am looking forward to working with him in his fourth term in office, for the betterment of our own people and for the betterment of the world.

Australia and the United States share a commitment to freedom. We understand we compete against an ideology of hatred, an ideology that murders the innocent in order to achieve objectives. We know we must be steadfast and strong when it comes to bringing to justice those who would kill innocent life -- like those who got killed in New York City and Washington, D.C. and Bali and London, and other places around the world. But we also understand that to defeat an ideology, you've got to have a better ideology -- and we do, one based upon human rights and human dignity, minority rights and freedom.

And the thing I appreciate about John Howard is he understands that. I appreciate the commitment of the Australian government to help in the democracy movements in both Iraq and Afghanistan. We had a good talk today about the way forward in Iraq. I assured him that our position is one that says, as the Iraqis stand up, America stands down. In other words, we're going to help Iraqis to defend themselves and, at the same time, promote a political process that will lead to a constitution -- a validation of the constitution and permanent elections.

We talked, as well, about Afghanistan and how important it is for a country like Afghanistan to show the world what is possible when it comes to democratic institutions and freedom.

I appreciated the Prime Minister's strong advice about Malaysia and Indonesia, two really important countries. And John Howard has got a lot of experience with the leaders in those countries, as well as the -- as well as the political process in the countries. And it's always good to visit with a friend about how he sees the world.

We talked about China and North Korea. I told him that we're committed to solving the North Korean nuclear issue in a diplomatic way, and that we're pleased that the six-party talks has become renewed, and that we're sincere about working with China and South Korea and Japan and Russia to bring some common sense to the leader of North Korea.

We talked about the benefits of the free trade agreement we signed: Our economies are strong, and that trade will help our economies stay strong, and that free trade and fair trade is important for the working people in both our countries, and that we're dedicated to making sure the next round of the WTO goes forward.

All in all, we had a really good discussion, the kind of discussion you'd expect from friends. And we're looking forward to continuing it over lunch.

John, welcome.

PRIME MINISTER HOWARD: Thank you very much, George. And I say to you, Mr. President, and to your wife, Laura, thank you very much for the great hospitality that you've extended to Janette and to me.

This is not only a close relationship between Australia and the United States, but it is a shared commitment by two peoples who have so much history and so much in the way of common values as a basis for the relationship.

Australia and the United States have never been closer than they are at the present time. But the reason that we are so close is that we are engaged together in quite a struggle against some forces and elements of evil around the world that threaten not only the people of our countries, but also the people of other nations.

Terrorists indiscriminately murder people irrespective of their race, their nationality, their religion, their political party, or their political belief. And those who doubt that, I invite them to look at the casualty lists of the London Underground and the bus. You will find not 55 people of Anglo-Celtic-Protestant composition, but you will find 55 people of different races, different ethnicities, different attitudes and different beliefs. And I say that to encapsulate the view that I hold very strongly, that to see this as some kind of struggle between the West and the rest is to completely misunderstand and completely misread what's involved.

I want to thank the President and the Congress of the United States for the support that was given so generously to the passage of the free trade agreement legislation. It passed through the two Houses of the American Congress with, I think, record majorities. And I believe that the economic association between Australia and the United States will be more important to Australia as the years go by, particularly in the area of services, where, because of the commonalities we share in language and legal systems and in so many other areas, the opportunities are going to be very much greater.

The President and I had a very extensive discussion about the involvement of both of our countries in the Asian Pacific region, about the critical importance of Indonesia, the third largest democracy in the world, the largest Islamic country in the world, and a nation whose success is immensely important to the ideological and intellectual debate in relation to terrorism, because if Indonesia is a success story, it can be held up as an example to the rest of the Islamic world that the path forward, the path to prosperity and stability, is a path away from hatred and extremism, and a path of moderation.

Can I say to you, Mr. President, that the personal relationship that we have established on behalf of our two countries means a great deal to me. But it is, as you rightly say, based on a common view of the world that individual freedom is still the greatest glue that nations and peoples can have; that societies that honor the family as the most stabilizing influence in our community, and also societies that recognize that the basis of national wealth is individual wealth built on competitive capitalism.

Not everybody in our two countries would entirely share every part of that statement of my philosophical beliefs, but I'm happy to say that in both countries a sufficient number of people -- (laughter) -- in recent times have shared those views to put smiles on both our faces. (Laughter.) And I must say, on a somewhat partisan note, how much I enjoyed my discussion with you on the night of the 9th of October of last year, and, equally, the opportunity I have of congratulating you on your remarkable victory, which -- after an election campaign that I followed with enormous interest. I come here as a friend of the United States. I come here as the leader of 20 million people who are committed, as you are, to the great causes of individual liberty and freedom. And together we can work to make a better world.

PRESIDENT BUSH: We'll answer two questions apiece. Jennifer.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Can you tell us, as you consider Supreme Court nominees, how important it is to you to replace Justice O'Connor with another woman? And can you bring us up to date on whether you've completed interviewing candidates?

PRESIDENT BUSH: First, I'm comfortable with where we are in the process. That's important for you to know. Secondly, that I have thought about a variety of people, people from different walks of life, some of whom I've known before, some of whom I had never met before. I'm trying to figure out what else I can say that you -- I didn't say yesterday that sounds profound to you without -- without actually answering your question. (Laughter.)

As I say, I do have an obligation to think about people from different backgrounds, but who share the same philosophy, people who will not legislate from the bench. That's what I told the people when I ran for President. I want to be known as the kind of person who does what he says he's going to do and -- because I believe it's right. And so, I guess the best way to put it is, I'll let you know when I'm ready to tell you who it is.

John, go ahead, ask -- want to call on some --

Q Mr. President, Mr. Prime Minister, before the invasion of Iraq, Mr. Howard said that our troops would be there for months, not years. It is now years. Realistically, how long can the Australian people expect our troops to be in Iraq and Afghanistan? Is it, now, more years?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Well, first, I think if you're going to ask how long the Australian troops will stay, you ought to ask the person who decides where the Australian troops go in the first place. I can tell you about the American troops, and that is that they'll be there as long as necessary to complete the mission.

There's a great temptation to get me or John to put a timetable on our actions there. That doesn't make any sense. Why would you tell the enemy how long you're going to stay somewhere? Why would you -- it just doesn't -- we're at war, and during a war, you do the best you can to win the war, and one way to embolden an enemy is to give them an artificial timetable. I'm sure probably -- timetables need to be asked -- I get asked about timetables all the time here. And -- but the answer is, when the Iraqis are ready to do the fighting themselves. And that's happening on a steady basis, and they're taking more and more of the fight to the enemy.

And like I'm sure in Australia, people in America want to know when the troops are coming home -- and as quickly as possible, but we've got to complete the mission. The mission is really important. We're laying the foundation for peace. A free Iraq, a democratic Iraq, in the heart of the Middle East, is a part of a vision that understands free societies are peaceful societies.

We're fighting an ideology, and the way you defeat an ideology that is so backward, so evil and so hated they kill innocent men and women regardless of religion, is to spread freedom. And that's why it's important we complete the mission in Iraq.

PRIME MINISTER HOWARD: Dennis, I did make that statement, and I made it in a particular context, which I'm sure you will recall. I'm not going to try and put a time limit on our commitment in Iraq; I'm not. It will be governed by circumstances, rather than by the calendar, to borrow an expression you may have heard yesterday when I was at the Pentagon. I thought it was a very good expression, and that's why -- and I won't plagiarize it; I'll acknowledge the source -- that is why I use it.

But I believe that progress is being made. I think we do face a situation where, because of the horror of suicide bombing, there is a constant high level of publicity, understandably, given to that, and to the detriment of the progress that is being made at a political level. I mean, nothing can answer and deny the fact that 8 million people risked their lives to vote. Now, that is a stunning personal commitment to democracy that Australians haven't been required to do in my lifetime, or, indeed, the average American citizen, either. Now, I think we have to pay some regard to that. And that is a cause worth fighting for, and it's a cause worth promoting and supporting.

Now, the great burden in Iraq is being carried by the United States, and I feel very deeply for the American people the burden they are carrying. I

also pay tribute to the burden that's being carried by the British. Our commitment is significant, but, obviously, it's much smaller than that of those two countries. But we will stay the distance in Iraq. We won't go until the job has been finished. And you've heard me say that before. That's been my view for a long time, and it will remain my view.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Caren.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. In light of the concerns that the CIA leak investigation is distracting from your agenda, has Mr. Rove or any of your aids offered their resignation? And what, short of a crime, constitutes a firing offense?

PRESIDENT BUSH: You know, I appreciate you bringing that up. My answer really hasn't changed -- (laughter) -- from 24 hours ago. It's the same answer. Now, I'll be glad to answer another question if you've got one. I -- I mean, I'll be glad to repeat what I said yesterday, which is, there's an ongoing investigation and people shouldn't jump to conclusions in the press until the investigation is over. And once the investigation is over, I'll deal with it.

Have you got another question? I don't want to shortchange you on a --

Q I do, actually. (Laughter.) What do you think of Edith Clement?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Pardon me?

Q What do you think of Edith Clement for the Court?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Oh, well, I think it's important -- let me refer you back to the first question. (Laughter.)

Q Can she have one more? (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT BUSH: I don't know, the Prime Minister is a friend. Why would I subject him to -- no. (Laughter.) Do you speak French? (Laughter.) It's unfair I get the last word at the mike. It's all inside, I'm sorry. Please.

Q Can I ask you both, please, for your view on China in the coming period? It seems that Australia views China principally as an economic opportunity. And we read increasingly that the U.S. sees it as an emerging military challenge, particularly in light of the comments made by General Zhu, just recently, about the possibility of a nuclear response on Taiwan. What I want to ask you particularly is what role you both see Australia playing in managing that emerging relationship?

PRESIDENT BUSH: It's a great question. Thanks for asking it. Our relationship -- let me start with our relationship with China. It is a complicated relationship. We obviously have an economic relationship with China that's an important relationship. Our exports to China are increasing. If you're a soybean farmer in America, you're really pleased with the fact that the Chinese market is open for our soybeans.

China is a -- I think it's in the world's interest that China grow an open market economy. I think open markets and free economies tend to cause people to demand additional freedoms. So it's in our economic interests and I think it's in the world's interest that we encourage free and fair trade.

We have some difficulties on the trade front with China. One such difficulty is their currency, and we've worked with China to convince them that it makes sense for them to change how they value their currency.

A second difficulty is on intellectual property rights. It's very important for emerging economies to understand that they -- in order to be a fair trading partner, that you've got to honor somebody else's intellectual property. And sometimes that's a hard concept for countries to understand. And so we're working very closely on that issue with China.

By the way, that's the same message that Australia gives, and so there's one area where Australia and the United States can work together to help convince China that intellectual property rights are important.

We have a diplomatic relationship with China, obviously. And that's manifested in the recent six-party talks in North Korea. I view it very important that China be an equal partner in those talks. We've got the capacity to bring something to the table when it's -- in discussions with North Korea, and so does China. And, therefore, diplomatically, we have an opportunity to effect world security and to make sure that the ultimate objective of the terrorists is not achieved, and that is the spread of weapons of mass destruction, for example. These are areas where we can cooperate and work hard.

We've got areas of issues when it comes to values. For example, I happen to believe religious freedom is very important for any society, and that people ought to be allowed to worship freely -- any -- worship any way they see fit. Every time I've met with the Chinese leaders, I've, in a respectful way, shared with them the importance, I feel, for a healthy society to recognize that people think differently and worship differently and, therefore, ought to be encouraged to do so. And so our relationship is very important and very vibrant. It's a good relationship, but it's a complex relationship.

I think that Australia, first of all, has got to act in her own interests. And there's no doubt in my mind the Prime Minister will do that. Secondly, though, that we can work together to reinforce the need for China to accept certain values as universal -- the value of minority rights, the value of freedom for people to speak, the value of freedom of religion, the same values we share.

Secondly, I know that Australia can lend a wise message to the Chinese about the need for China to take an active role in the neighborhood to prevent, for example, Kim Jong-il from developing a nuclear weapon. We've got a lot of common interests, and it's when those common interests and common values intersect, is where we can reinforce each other's message.

PRIME MINISTER HOWARD: Mark, I think your question is based on a misapprehension shared by a number of people in Australia, and that is that we are trying to manage a relationship we have with two countries where some kind of conflict between those two countries is inevitable, and I'm not as pessimistic as that. I am a lot more optimistic for the reasons I outlined in the speech I delivered to the Lowy Institute a few months ago in Australia.

We have different relationships with the United States and China. I mean, of course, our relationship with the United States is closer and deeper than it is with China, because it's a relationship that is based upon shared values and a lot of shared history. The Chinese understand that. I think

one of the bases -- the basis of our relationship successfully with China over the last eight or nine years is that I have never disguised that fact in my discussions with the Chinese, and I've encouraged them to accept that our close defense alliance with the United States is not in any way directed against China.

But we have a good relationship with China. It's not just based on economic opportunity. There are a lot of people-to-people ties between Australia and China, and they're growing all the time. We are going to differ with China on human rights issues. You've seen recently, in the debate over Mr. Chen, you've seen an expression of views from China. But equally, I think the relationship between our two countries is mature enough to ride through temporary arguments such as that. I think China sees a growing place for themselves in the world, but I think there's a great level of pragmatism in the Chinese leadership.

Now, the economic relationship between Australia and China is different from the economic relationship between the United States and China. And I understand that and the President and I talked about that today. But I have a more optimistic view about the relationship between China and the United States, and I know that the leadership of both countries understands the importance of common sense in relation to Taiwan, a recognition that there are differences of philosophy between the two societies.

But let us not look at this issue from an Australia vantage point of believing that there's some inevitable dust-up going to occur. I don't believe that, and I share a great deal of optimism that that is going to be prevented. From Australia's point of view, well, we don't presume any kind of intermediary role. That would be absurd. We have relationships with the United States, which I've talked about and categorized in an unambiguous way. Everybody understands the centrality of that relationship to Australia. The Chinese understand it. But we are unashamed in developing our relations with China, and I am well pleased with the way the economic relationship has developed. And I'll continue to do everything I can in the interests of Australia to ensure that it develops further.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Good job, John. Thank you.

Thank you all.

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