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President Discusses Iraqi Constitution with Press Pool

Tamarack Resort
Donnelly, Idaho

8:50 A.M. MDT

THE PRESIDENT: I want to thank the Governor for the invitation to come to Idaho. He's been asking me to come here for five years, and I finally made it. I'm going to tell the people tomorrow in Boise that I made a mistake not coming here earlier. It's a beautiful state. We're out spending a little time hiking the trails here. This is a spectacular part of the world. I want to thank the people of Idaho for a warm welcome.



I'm looking forward to my speech tomorrow, to thank the Idaho National Guard and those who are on active duty for their selfless dedication to working to make this world a more secure place for those of us who love freedom. I'll remind the people that we're making progress on two fronts -- a political front. The Iraqi people are working hard to reach a consensus on their constitution. It's an amazing process to work. First of all, the fact that they're even writing a constitution is vastly different from living under the iron hand of a dictator.

As Americans watch the constitutional process unfold, as we watch people work to achieve compromise and unity, we've got to remember our own history. We had trouble at our own conventions writing a constitution. It took a lot of work and a lot of interest, and willingness of people to work for the common good. That's what we're seeing in Iraq, and that's a positive development. The fact that Iraq will have a democratic constitution that honors women's rights, the rights of minorities, is going to be an important change in the broader Middle East.

And on the security front, we'll remain on the hunt. We have an obligation and a duty to protect this country. And one way to do so is to not only firm up the homeland, but to stay on the offense against the terrorists, and we'll do so. We'll defeat the terrorists; we'll train Iraqi forces to defeat the terrorists. In the long run, we'll defeat the terrorists through the spread of freedom and democracy.

Anyway, thanks for the invitation. The Idaho National Guard has done good strong work, and I look forward to thanking them in person. I'll take a couple of questions -- AP.

Q Mr. President, we know you met with Cindy Sheehan a year ago, but she says a lot has changed since then; she has more to say to you. And even some Republicans have said that you should meet with her. Why not do that when you get back to the ranch?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I did meet with Cindy Sheehan. I strongly support her right to protest. There's a lot of people protesting, and there's a lot of points of view about the Iraq war. As you know, in Crawford last weekend there were people from both sides of the issue, or from all sides of the issue there to express their opinions.



I sent Deputy Chief of Staff Hagin and National Security Advisor Hadley to meet with Ms. Sheehan early on. She expressed her opinion. I disagree with it. I think immediate withdrawal from Iraq would be a mistake. I think those who advocate immediate withdrawal from not only Iraq but the Middle East would be -- are advocating a policy that would weaken the United States. So I appreciate her right to protest. I understand her anguish. I met with a lot of families. She doesn't represent the view of a lot of the families I have met with. And I'll continue to meet with families.

Toby.

Q Hi, how are you doing?

THE PRESIDENT: I got you this time.

Q Mr. President, Israel has withdrawn from the final settlement. What does the Palestinian leader Abbas need to do next? And are there any specific plans for restarting negotiations based on the road map?

THE PRESIDENT: First of all, I want to congratulate Prime Minister Sharon for having made a very tough decision. As I said in my remarks yesterday in Salt Lake City, the Prime Minister made a courageous decision to withdraw from the Gaza. We have got Jim Wolfensohn, the former head of the World Bank, on the ground, helping President Abbas develop a government that responds to the will of the folks in Gaza. In other words, this is step one in the development of a democracy.

And so to answer your question, what must take place next is the establishment of a working government in Gaza, a government that responds to the people. President Abbas has made a commitment to fight off the violence, because he understands a democracy can't exist with terrorist groups trying to take the law into their own hands.

Along these lines, we've also got General Ward on the ground, helping the Palestinians consolidate their security forces. It turns out that the post-Arafat regime is one of different factions and different security forces that were really in place to kind of maintain his power, but not necessarily to protect the overall security of the Palestinian people. It's in the interest to consolidate the security forces, so that there is a -- the government has got a vehicle and a group of folks by which to help enforce order.

You asked about the road map. Of course you want to get back to the road map. But I understand that in order for this process to go forward there must be confidence -- confidence that the Palestinian people will have in their own government to perform, confidence with the Israelis that they'll see a peaceful state emerging. And therefore it's very important for the world to stay focused on Gaza, and helping Gaza -- helping the Gaza economy get going, helping rebuild the settlements for Gaza -- for the people of Gaza.



This is a very hopeful period. Again, I applaud Prime Minister Sharon for making a decision that has really changed the dynamics on the ground, and has really provided hope for the Palestinian people. My vision, my hope is that one day we'll see two states -- two democratic states living side by side in peace.

Who else we got? Bloomberg.

Q Mr. President, the Sunni negotiator yesterday for the constitution said that if they do pass the constitution tomorrow, that it would cause an insurgency amongst the Sunnis. What would America do if the Sunnis did rise up and have an insurgency?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think -- you know, you're speaking about one voice. There is more than one Sunni involved in the process. Reaching an accord on a constitution, after years of dictatorship, is not easy. And so you're seeing people express their opinion. I don't know if this is a negotiating position by the fellow or not. I'm not on the ground, I didn't hear him.

But I will tell you I spoke with Secretary Rice twice this morning, who has been in touch with our ambassador on the ground. And she is hopeful that more and more Sunnis will accept the constitution. Again, I repeat to you that we're watching an amazing event unfold, and that is the writing of a constitution which guarantees minority rights, women's rights, freedom to worship, in a part of the world that had only -- in a country that had only known dictatorship. And so you're seeing people express their opinions and talking about a political process.

And the way forward in Iraq is for there to be a two-track strategy. One, on the one hand, there's politics. It wasn't all that long ago, but it seems like a long time ago, I guess, for some, that the Iraqi people expressed their interest in democracy. Eight million people voted. They said, we want to be free. They went to the polls, said, give us a chance to vote, and we will, and they did. In other words, they have made their intentions known that they want to have a free society. And now they're writing a constitution.

The next step after the constitution will be the ratification of the constitution, and then the election of a permanent government. In other words, democracy is unfolding. And the reason why that's important is, is that we've had a -- we had a policy that just said, let the dictator stay there, don't worry about it. And as a result of dictatorship, and as a result of tyranny, resentment, hopelessness began to develop in that part of the world, which became the -- gave the terrorists capacity to recruit. We just cannot tolerate the status quo. We're at war. And so this is a hopeful moment.

And you talk about Sunnis rising up. I mean, the Sunnis have got to make a choice -- do they want to live in a society that's free, or do they want to live in violence. And I suspect most mothers, no matter what their religion may be, will choose a free society, so that their children can grow up in a peaceful world.

Anyway, I'm optimistic about what's taking place. I'm also optimistic about the fact that more and more Iraqis are able to take the fight to the enemy. And as I'll remind the good folks of Idaho, our strategy can be summed up this way: As the Iraqis stand up, Americans will stand down. And what that means is, as more and more Iraqis take the fight to the few who want to disrupt the dreams of the many, that the American troops will be able to pull back. We're still going to be training Iraqis; we'll still be working with Iraqis. But more and more Iraqis will be in the fight.

We've got somebody from Fox here, somebody told me?

Q Yes, Mr. President, thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: There you are, kind of blending in.

Q Sorry about that. Does the administration's goal -- I'll ask you about the Iraqi constitution. You said you're confident that it will honor the rights of women.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q If it's rooted in Islam, as it seems it will be, is that still -- is there still the possibility of honoring the rights of women?

THE PRESIDENT: I talked to Condi, and there is not -- as I understand it, the way the constitution is written is that women have got rights, inherent rights recognized in the constitution, and that the constitution talks about not "the religion," but "a religion." Twenty-five percent of the assembly is going to be women, which is a -- is embedded in the constitution.

Okay. It's been a pleasure.

Q What else are you going to do? Are you going to be bike today?

THE PRESIDENT: I may bike today. I've been on the phone all morning. I spent a little time with the CIA man this morning, catching up on the events of the world. And as I said, I talked to Condi a couple of times. Tonight I'm going to be dining with the Governor and the delegation from Idaho, spend a little quality time with the First Lady here in this beautiful part of the world. I may go for a bike ride.

Q Any fishing?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't know yet. I haven't made up my mind yet. I'm kind of hanging loose, as they say. (Laughter.)

All right, I've got to go. Thank you.

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