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For Immediate Release
Office of the Press Secretary
September 28, 2005

President Meets with Generals Abizaid and Casey, Discusses War on Terror

The Rose Garden

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10:26 A.M. EDT



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President's Remarks

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THE PRESIDENT: Good morning. I just had a good meeting with Generals Abizaid and Casey. We discussed the war on terror in which this country is engaged. General Abizaid talked about the global scope of this war. He talked about the nature of an enemy we face, an enemy which is ruthless and brutal, an enemy which has got strategic goals and tactics necessary to achieve those goals. We also talked about the fact that we're determined to defeat the enemy. We discussed our strategy for victory in Iraq, as well. After all, Iraq is a key battlefield in this war on terror.



I asked the Generals to go up to Capitol Hill to brief members of the House and Senate on our strategy for victory, on our operations in Iraq. They updated me on what recently took place in Baghdad, in which Iraqi and coalition forces tracked down and killed Abu Azzam, the second most wanted al Qaeda leader in Iraq. This guy is a brutal killer. He was one of Zarqawi's top lieutenants. He was reported to be the top operational commander of al Qaeda in Baghdad. He is one of the terrorists responsible for the recent upsurge in attacks in the Iraqi capital, which is part of their campaign to stop a referendum on the Iraqi constitution, and is part of their efforts to break the will of the American people and the will of our coalition.

Our strategy is clear in Iraq. We are hunting down high value targets like Azzam and Zarqawi. We're coordinating aggressive counterterrorism operations in the areas where the terrorists are concentrated. We're constantly adapting our tactics to the changing tactics of the terrorists. We're training more Iraqi forces to assume increasing responsibility for their country's security.

The growing size and increasing capability of the Iraqi security forces are helping our coalition address a challenge we have faced since the beginning of the war. And General Casey discussed this with us in the Oval Office.

See, it used to be after we cleared the terrorists out of a city, there wasn't enough qualified Iraqi troops to maintain control -- so when we left to conduct other missions, the terrorists would move back in. Now, the increasing number of more capable Iraqi troops has allowed us to better 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 cleared out, we can keep the cities safe while we move on to hunt down the terrorists in other parts of the country.

We saw such success in the country's northwest region, where Iraqi and coalition forces recently targeted an area that was one of the main routes that foreign terrorists use to enter Iraq from Syria. During the operations in the key town of Tal Afar, Iraqi security forces outnumbered coalition forces for the first time in a major offensive operation. General Casey brought us up to date on that operation. Because of our joint efforts, hundreds of terrorists have been killed or captured or flushed, which makes it more difficult for the foreign terrorists to enter Iraq through the northwest route.



As part of General Casey's strategy, Iraqi forces remain in Tal Afar to ensure that the terrorists are not allowed to return and regroup. Coalition and Iraqi troops are on the hunt for terrorists in western Iraq. We're on the offense. We have a plan to win. We're working to stop those terrorists from crossing into the country through Syria, and we're denying safe haven to al Qaeda in the Anbar province.

Members of Congress will get the latest information about our strategy. And I want to thank them for taking time out of their schedules to listen to these two -- to these two Generals. They will hear about the strategy and the progress in increasing the size and capability of the Iraqi security forces. At this moment, more than a dozen Iraqi battalions have completed training and are conducting anti-terrorist operations in Ramadi and Fallujah. More than 20 battalions are operating in Baghdad. And some have taken the lead in operations in major sectors of the city.

In total, more than 100 battalions are operating throughout Iraq. Our commanders report that the Iraqi forces are operating with increasing effectiveness. As Iraqi forces show they're capable of keeping the terrorists out, they're earning the trust and confidence of the Iraqi people, which ensures the success of a free and democratic Iraq.

The terrorists have a history of escalating their attacks before Iraq's major political milestones. Two key elections are fast approaching. As these milestones approach, we can expect there to be increasing violence from the terrorists. They can't stand elections. The thought of people voting is an anathema to them. You see, democracy and freedom are the exact opposite of what's in their mind, in their vision.

Next month the Iraqis will vote on a democratic constitution. If that constitution is approved, they will return to polls later this year to elect a fully constitutional government. The terrorists will fail. See, the Iraqis want to be free. They proved that last January when over 8 million citizens, in the face of violence and threats, voted. And the terrorists are going to fail this time. But we can expect they'll do everything in their power to try to stop the march of freedom. And our troops are ready for it.

I urge the members of Congress to attend the briefings with Generals Abizaid and Casey. I urge them to ask questions about our efforts in Iraq and to listen carefully about the type of war we fight. The support of Congress for our troops and our mission is important, and Americans need to know about the gains we've made in recent weeks and months. They need to know the way we're adopting our tactics and the way we're changing our strategy to meet the needs on the ground.

As members of Congress speak with Generals Abizaid and Casey, I'm confident they'll see what I see -- our leaders, these two Generals are men of vision and determination, and it is their leadership that is helping bring victory in the war on terror.

Thank you, very much.

END 10:33 A.M. EDT

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