

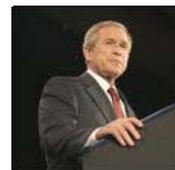
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President Discusses Iraqi Elections, Victory in the War on Terror

The Woodrow Wilson Center
Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center
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-  [In Focus: National Security](#)
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President's Remarks

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. Please be seated. Thank you for the warm welcome. I'm delighted to be here with the men and women of the Wilson Center. According to your mission statement, the Center was created to bring together two groups -- political leaders and scholars. I see some of the political leaders who are here, and I presume you've invited me to uphold the scholars' end. (Laughter.)



I've come to discuss an issue of vital importance to the American people, and that is: Victory in the war on terror. On September the 11th, 2001, our nation awoke to a sudden attack, and we accepted new responsibilities. We are confronting new dangers with firm resolve. We're hunting down the terrorists and their supporters. We will fight this war without wavering -- and we will prevail. (Applause.)

In the war on terror, Iraq is now the central front -- and over the last few weeks, I've been discussing our political, economic, and military strategy for victory in that country. A historic election will take place tomorrow in Iraq. And as millions of Iraqis prepare to cast their ballots, I want to talk today about why we went into Iraq, why we stayed in Iraq, and why we cannot -- and will not -- leave Iraq until victory is achieved. (Applause.)

I want to thank Ambassador Gildenhorn for inviting me and introducing me. And I want to thank the members of the Board of Trustees who are here. I appreciate Lee Hamilton, who serves our nation so well in so many different capacities. Thank you for being the President and Director of the Woodrow Wilson Center.

I'm proud to be traveling today with members of my Cabinet: Secretary of State Condi Rice; Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld; and Secretary of Homeland Security Mike Chertoff. Thank you all for coming. (Applause.) I appreciate the members of the Congress who are here. Thanks for taking time to come. I want to thank the members of the Diplomatic Corps that have joined us today. And thank you all for being here, as well.

We are living through a watershed moment in the story of freedom. Most of the focus now is on this week's elections -- and rightly so. Iraqis will go to the polls to choose a government that will be the only constitutional democracy in the Arab world. Yet we need to remember that these elections are also a vital part of a broader strategy for protecting the American people against the threat of terrorism.

We saw the future the terrorists intend for our nation on that fateful morning of September the 11th, 2001. That day we learned that vast oceans and friendly neighbors are no longer enough to protect us. September the 11th changed our country; it changed the policy of our government. We adopted a new strategy to protect the American people: We would hunt down the terrorists wherever they hide; we would make no distinction between the terrorists and those who harbor them; and we would advance our security at home by advancing freedom in the Middle East.



September the 11th also changed the way I viewed threats like Saddam Hussein. We saw the destruction terrorists could cause with airplanes loaded with jet fuel -- and we imagined the destruction they could cause with even more powerful weapons. At the time, the leaders of both political parties recognized this new reality: We cannot allow the world's most dangerous men to get their hands on the world's most dangerous weapons. In an age of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, if we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long. (Applause.)

We removed Saddam Hussein from power because he was a threat to our security. He had pursued and used weapons of mass destruction. He sponsored terrorists. He ordered his military to shoot at American and British pilots patrolling the no-fly zones. He invaded his neighbors. He fought a

war against the United States and a broad coalition. He had declared that the United States of America was his enemy.

Over the course of a decade, Saddam Hussein refused to comply with more than a dozen United Nations resolutions -- including demands that he respect the rights of the Iraqi people, disclose his weapons, and abide by the terms of a 1991 cease-fire. He deceived international inspectors, and he denied them the unconditional access they needed to do their jobs. When a unanimous Security Council gave him one final chance to disclose and disarm, or face serious consequences, he refused to comply with that final opportunity. At any point along the way, Saddam Hussein could have avoided war by complying with the just demands of the international community. The United States did not choose war -- the choice was Saddam Hussein's.

When we made the decision to go into Iraq, many intelligence agencies around the world judged that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction. This judgment was shared by the intelligence agencies of governments who did not support my decision to remove Saddam. And it is true that much of the intelligence turned out to be wrong. As President, I'm responsible for the decision to go into Iraq -- and I'm also responsible for fixing what went wrong by reforming our intelligence capabilities. And we're doing just that. At the same time, we must remember that an investigation after the war by chief weapons inspector Charles Duelfer found that Saddam was using the U.N. oil-for-food program to influence countries and companies in an effort to undermine sanctions, with the intent of restarting his weapons programs once the sanctions collapsed and the world looked the other way. Given Saddam's history and the lessons of September the 11th, my decision to remove Saddam Hussein was the right decision. Saddam was a threat -- and the American people and the world is better off because he is no longer in power. (Applause.) We are in Iraq today because our goal has always been more than the removal of a brutal dictator; it is to leave a free and democratic Iraq in its place.



As I stated in a speech in the lead-up to the war, a liberated Iraq could show the power of freedom to transform the Middle East by bringing hope and progress to the lives of millions. So we're helping the Iraqi -- Iraqi people build a lasting democracy that is peaceful and prosperous and an example for the broader Middle East. The terrorists understand this, and that is why they have now made Iraq the central front in the war on terror.

The enemy of freedom in Iraq is a combination of rejectionists and Saddamists and terrorists. The rejectionists are ordinary Iraqis, mostly Sunni Arabs, who miss the privileged status they had under the regime of Saddam Hussein. We believe that, over time, most of this group will be persuaded to support the democratic Iraq led by a federal government that is strong enough to protect minority rights. We're encouraged by the indications that many Sunnis intend to participate in tomorrow's elections.

The Saddamists are former regime loyalists who harbor dreams of returning to power, and they're trying to foment anti-democratic sentiment amongst the larger Sunni community. Yet they lack popular support, and over time, they can be marginalized and defeated by the security forces of a free Iraq.

The terrorists affiliated with or inspired by al Qaeda are the smallest, but most lethal group. They are led by a brutal terrorist named Zarqawi. He's al Qaeda's chief operations officer in Iraq. He has stated his allegiance to Osama bin Laden. The terrorists have ambitions; they have goals. They want to stop the advance of freedom in Iraq. They want to make Iraq what Afghanistan was under the Taliban -- a safe haven from which they can plot attacks against our people. There is no limit to their brutality. They kill the innocent to achieve their aims. This is an enemy without conscience -- and against such enemy, there is only one effective response: We will never back down, we will never give in, and we will never accept anything less than complete victory. (Applause.)

Last month, my administration released a document called the "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq." In recent weeks, I've been discussing our strategy with the American people. At the U.S. Naval Academy, I spoke about how we changed our approach to training Iraqi security forces, so they can take the fight to the enemy and eventually take responsibility for the security of their citizens without major foreign assistance. Iraqi forces are becoming more and more capable.

This time last year, there was only a handful of Iraqi battalions ready for combat. Now there are more than 125 Iraqi army and police combat battalions in the fight against the terrorists. Of these, more than 70 Iraqi battalions are fighting side-by-side with coalition forces, and more than 50 others are taking the lead in the fight. So far, in December, there have been more than 900 combat operations in Iraq at the company level or above, and 75 percent of these involved Iraqi security forces either in the lead or fighting side-by-side with our coalition. As these Iraqi forces grow in size and strength, American and coalition forces can concentrate on training Iraqis, and hunting down high-value targets like Zarqawi and his associates.

Last week before the Council on Foreign Relations, I explained how we changed our approach to help Iraqis hold and rebuild cities taken from the enemy, and how to help them revitalize Iraq's infrastructure and economy. Today, many cities like Mosul and Najaf are coming back to life, and Iraq's economy is growing. Thousands of new businesses have opened in Iraq, personal income is up, and according to one survey, seven in 10 Iraqis say their own lives are going well, and nearly two-thirds expect things to improve in the next year.

Earlier this week at the Philadelphia World Affairs Council, I spoke in depth about how we changed our approach to helping the Iraqis build their democracy. At the request of Iraqi leaders, we accelerated the transition to Iraqi self-government. We set four major milestones to guide Iraq's transition to constitutional democracy: the transfer of sovereignty, elections for a transitional government, the adoption of a democratic constitution, and elections for a new government under that constitution. In spite of the violence, Iraqis have met every milestone -- and this is changing the political landscape in Iraq.

Sunni Arabs who failed to participate in the January elections are now campaigning vigorously in this week's elections -- and we can expect a higher turnout of Sunni voters. As Sunnis join the political process, Iraqi democracy becomes more inclusive -- and the terrorists and Saddamists are becoming marginalized.

Each of the changes we have made in our approach in Iraq is helping us meet the hard realities and the facts on the ground. We've adapted our tactics; we have fixed what was not working, and we have listened to those who know best: our military commanders -- and the Iraqi people.

Our tactics continue to change, but our goal in Iraq has not changed: a free and democratic Iraq. I strongly believe a democratic Iraq is a crucial part of our strategy to defeat the terrorists, because only democracy can bring freedom and reconciliation to Iraq, and peace to this troubled part of the world. Our efforts to advance freedom in Iraq are driven by our vital interests and our deepest beliefs. America was founded on the principle that all men are created equal, and we believe that the people of the Middle East desire freedom as much as we do. History has shown that free nations are peaceful nations. And as Iraqi democracy takes hold, Iraqi citizens will have a stake in a common and peaceful future.

As we advance the cause of freedom in Iraq, our nation can proceed with confidence because we have done this kind of work before. After World War II, President Harry Truman believed that the way to help bring peace and prosperity to Asia was to plant the seeds of freedom and democracy in Japan. Like today, there were many skeptics and pessimists who said that the Japanese were not ready for democracy. Fortunately, President Harry Truman stuck to his guns. He believed, as I do, in freedom's power to transform an adversary into an ally. And because he stayed true to his convictions, today Japan is one of the world's freest and most prosperous nations, and one of America's closest allies in keeping the peace. The spread of freedom to Iraq and the Middle East requires the same confidence and persistence, and it will lead to the same results. (Applause.)

The people of Iraq are now seeing some of the tangible benefits of their new democracy. They see that as freedom advances, their lives are improving. Iraqis have approved a bold constitution that guarantees the rule of law and freedom of assembly, and property rights, and freedom of speech and the press, and women's rights, and the right to vote. They see their freedom increasingly being defended by their own soldiers and police instead of foreign forces. And they see that freedom is bringing opportunity and a better life.

The Iraqis still face many challenges, including security, and reconstruction, and economic reform. But they are building a strong democracy that can handle these challenges and that will be a model for the Middle East. Freedom in Iraq will inspire reformers from Damascus to Tehran. This new Iraq shares our deepest values, and it shares our most determined enemies. By helping Iraqis build a nation that can govern itself, sustain itself, and defend itself, we will gain an ally in the war on terror and a partner for peace in the Middle East.

The stakes in Iraq are high, and we will not leave until victory has been achieved. (Applause.) Today there's an intense debate about the importance of Iraq to the war on terror. The constant headlines about car bombings and killings have led some to ask whether our presence in Iraq has made America less secure. This view presumes that if we were not in Iraq, the terrorists would be leaving us alone. The reality is that the terrorists have been targeting America for years, long before we ever set foot in Iraq.

We were not in Iraq in 1993, when the terrorists tried to blow up the World Trade Center in New York. We were not in Iraq in 1998, when the terrorists bombed our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. We were not in Iraq in 2000, when the terrorists killed 17 American sailors aboard the USS Cole. There wasn't a single American soldier in Iraq on September the 11th, 2001, when the terrorists murdered nearly 3,000 people in the worst attack on our home since Pearl Harbor.

These acts are part of a grand strategy by the terrorists. Their stated objective is to drive the United States and coalition forces out of the Middle East so they can gain control of Iraq and use that country as a base from which to launch attacks against America, overthrow moderate governments in the Middle East, and establish a totalitarian Islamic empire that stretches from Spain to Indonesia. Hear the words of the terrorists. In a letter to the terrorist leader Zarqawi, the al Qaeda leader Zawahiri has outlined plans that will unfold in several stages. These are his words: "... Expel the Americans from Iraq. ... Establish an Islamic authority over as much territory as you can to spread its power in Iraq... Extend the jihad wave to secular countries neighboring Iraq." End quote.

To achieve these goals, the terrorists are targeting innocent men, women, and children. The enemy has only the ability to create chaos for the cameras with spectacular acts of violence. They know they cannot defeat us militarily. So they're trying to break our will in the hopes of getting America to leave the battlefield early, and they cite Vietnam as a reason they can prevail. Zawahiri, in his letter to Zarqawi, wrote, "The aftermath of the collapse of the American power in Vietnam -- and how they ran and left their agents -- is noteworthy." In the past, al Qaeda has said that American pullouts of Lebanon and Somalia showed them that America is weak and could be made to run. And now the terrorists think they can make America run in Iraq. There's only one way the terrorists can prevail: if we lose our nerve and leave before the job is done. And that is not going to happen on my watch. (Applause.)

Some in Washington are calling for a rapid and complete withdrawal of our forces in Iraq. They say that our presence there is the cause for instability in Iraq, and that the answer is to set a deadline to withdraw. I disagree. I've listened carefully to all the arguments, and there are four reasons why I believe that setting an artificial deadline would be a recipe for disaster.

First, setting an artificial deadline would send the wrong message to the Iraqis. As Iraqis are risking their lives for democracy, it would tell them that America is more interested in leaving than helping them succeed, put at risk all the democratic progress they have made over the past year.

Secondly, setting an artificial deadline would send the wrong message to the enemy. It would tell them that if they wait long enough, America will cut and run. It would vindicate the terrorists' tactics of beheadings and suicide bombings and mass murder. It would embolden the terrorists and invite new attacks on America.

Third, setting an artificial deadline would send the wrong message to the region and the world. It would tell our friends and supporters that America is a weak and unreliable ally, and that when the going gets tough, America will retreat.

Finally, setting an artificial deadline would send the wrong message to the most important audience -- our troops on the front line. It would tell them that America is abandoning the mission they are risking their lives to achieve, and that the sacrifice of their comrades killed in this struggle has been in vain. I make this pledge to the families of the fallen: We will carry on the fight, we will complete their mission, and we will win. (Applause.)

Victory will be achieved by meeting certain clear objectives: when the terrorists and Saddamists can no longer threaten Iraq's democracy, when the Iraqi security forces can protect their own people, and when Iraq is not a safe haven for terrorists to plot attacks against our country. These objectives, not timetables set by politicians in Washington, will drive our force levels in Iraq. As Iraqis stand up, we will stand down. And when victory is achieved, our troops will then come home, with the honor they have earned. (Applause.)

One of the blessings of our free society is that we can debate these issues openly, even in a time of war. Most of the debate has been a credit to our democracy, but some have launched irresponsible charges. They say that we act because of oil, that we act in Iraq because of Israel, or because we misled the American people. Some of the most irresponsible comments about manipulating intelligence have come from politicians who saw the same intelligence we saw, and then voted to authorize the use of force against Saddam Hussein. These charges are pure politics. They hurt the morale of our troops. Whatever our differences in Washington, our men and women in uniform deserve to know that once our politicians vote to send them into harm's way, our support will be with them in good days and bad, and we will settle for nothing less than complete victory. (Applause.)

Before this victory comes, we still have a lot of difficult work ahead. We've made real progress in the last two and a half years, and the terrorists see this progress and they're determined to stop it. These enemies are not going to give up because of a successful election. They know that as democracy takes root in Iraq, their hateful ideology will suffer a devastating blow. So we can expect violence to continue.

We can also expect that the elections will be followed by days of uncertainty. We may not know for certain who's won the elections until the early part of January -- and that's important for our citizens to understand. It's going to take a while. It's also going to take a while for them to form a government. The work ahead will require patience of the Iraqi people, and require our patience, as well. Yet we must remember that a free Iraq is in our interests, because a free Iraq will be a beacon of hope. And as the Middle East grows in liberty, the American people will become safer and our nation will be more secure.

The work ahead will also require continued sacrifice. Yet we can be confident, because history has shown the power of freedom to overcome tyranny. And we can be confident because we have on our side the greatest force for freedom in human history: the men and women of the United States Armed Forces. (Applause.)

One of these men was a Marine lieutenant named Ryan McGlothlin, from Lebanon, Virginia. Ryan was a bright young man who had everything going for him and he always wanted to serve our nation. He was a valedictorian of his high school class. He graduated from William & Mary with near-perfect grade averages, and he was on a full scholarship at Stanford, where he was working toward a doctorate in chemistry.

Two years after the attacks of September the 11th, the young man who had the world at his feet came home from Stanford for a visit. He told his dad, "I just don't feel like I'm doing something that matters. I want to serve my country. I want to protect our lands from terrorists, so I joined the Marines." When his father asked him if there was some other way to serve, Ryan replied that he felt a special obligation to step up because he had been given so much. Ryan didn't support me in the last election, but he supported our mission in Iraq. And he supported his fellow Marines.

Ryan was killed last month fighting the terrorists near the -- Iraq's Syrian border. In his pocket was a poem that Ryan had read at his high school graduation, and it represented the spirit of this fine Marine. The poem was called "Don't Quit."

In our fight to keep America free, we'll never quit. We've lost wonderful Americans like Ryan McGlothlin. We cherish the memory of each one. We pray the loved ones -- pray for the loved ones they've left behind, and we count it a privilege to be citizens of a country they served. We also honor them by acknowledging that their sacrifice has brought us to this moment: the birth of a free and sovereign Iraqi nation that will be a friend of the United States, and a force for good in a troubled region of the world.

The story of freedom has just begun in the Middle East. And when the history of these days is written, it will tell how America once again defended its own freedom by using liberty to transform nations from bitter foes to strong allies. And history will say that this generation, like generations before, laid the foundation of peace for generations to come.

May God bless you all. (Applause.)

END 11:39 A.M. EST

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