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## President Discusses War on Terror and Operation Iraqi Freedom

Renaissance Cleveland Hotel  
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President's Remarks

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12:25 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all. (Applause.) Thank you all. Please be seated. Sanjiv, thanks for the introduction. He called me on the phone and said, listen, we believe in free speech, so you're going to come and give us a speech for free. (Laughter.) Thanks for the invitation, thanks for the warm welcome. It's good to be here at the City Club of Cleveland.



For almost a century, you have provided an important forum for debate and discussion on the issues of the day. And I have come to discuss a vital issue of the day, which is the safety and security of every American -- and our need to achieve victory in the war on terror.

I want to thank the Mayor for joining us. Mr. Mayor, appreciate you being here. (Applause.) It must make you feel pretty good to get the "Most Liveable City" award. (Laughter.) I want to thank all the members of the City Club for graciously inviting me to come. I want to thank the students who are here. Thanks for your interest in your government. I look forward to giving you a speech and then answering questions, if you have any.

The central front on the war on terror is Iraq. And in the past few weeks, we've seen horrific images coming out of that country. We've seen a great house of worship -- the Golden Mosque of Samarra -- in ruins after a brutal terrorist attack. We have seen reprisal attacks by armed militia on Sunni mosques. We have seen car bombs take the lives of shoppers in a crowded market in Sadr City. We've seen the bodies of scores of Iraqi men brutally executed or beaten to death.

The enemies of a free Iraq attacked the Golden Mosque for a reason: They know they lack the military strength to challenge Iraqi and coalition forces in a direct battle, so they're trying to provoke a civil war. By attacking one of Shia Islam's holiest sites, they hoped to incite violence that would drive Iraqis apart and stop their progress on the path to a free society.

The timing of the attack in Samarra is no accident. It comes at a moment when Iraq's elected leaders are working to form a unity government. Last December, four short months ago, more than 11 million people expressed their opinion. They said loud and clear at the ballot box that they desire a future of freedom and unity. And now it is time for the leaders to put aside their differences, reach out across political, religious, and sectarian lines, and form a unity government that will earn the trust and the confidence of all Iraqis. My administration, led by Ambassador Zai Khalilzad, is helping, and will continue to help the Iraqis achieve this goal.

The situation on the ground remains tense. And in the face of continued reports about killings and reprisals, I understand how some Americans have had their confidence shaken. Others look at the violence they see each night on their television screens, and they wonder how I can remain so optimistic about the prospects of success in Iraq. They wonder what I see that they don't. So today I'd like to share a concrete example of progress in Iraq that most Americans do not see every day in their newspapers and on their television screens. I'm going to tell you the story of a northern Iraqi city called Tal Afar, which was once a key base of operations for al Qaeda and is today a free city that gives reason for hope for a free Iraq.





Tal Afar is a city of more than 200,000 residents, roughly the population of Akron, Ohio. In many ways, Tal Afar is a microcosm of Iraq: It has dozens of tribes of different ethnicity and religion. Most of the city residents are Sunnis of Turkmen origin. Tal Afar sits just 35 miles from the Syrian border. It was a strategic location for al Qaeda and their leader, Zarqawi. Now, it's important to remember what Al Qaeda has told us, their stated objectives. Their goal is to drive us out of Iraq so they can take the country over. Their goal is to overthrow moderate Muslim governments throughout the region. Their goal is to use Iraq as a base from which to launch attacks against America. To achieve this goal, they're recruiting terrorists from the Middle East to come into Iraq to infiltrate its cities, and to sow violence and destruction so that no legitimate government can exercise control. And Tal Afar was a key way station for their operations in Iraq.

After we removed Saddam Hussein in April 2003, the terrorists began moving into the city. They sought to divide Tal Afar's many ethnic and religious groups, and forged an alliance of convenience with those who benefitted from Saddam's regime and others with their own grievances. They skillfully used propaganda to foment hostility toward the coalition and the new Iraqi government. They exploited a weak economy to recruit young men to their cause. And by September 2004, the terrorists and insurgents had basically seized control of Tal Afar.

We recognized the situation was unacceptable. So we launched a military operation against them. After three days of heavy fighting, the terrorists and the insurgents fled the city. Our strategy at the time was to stay after the terrorists and keep them on the run. So coalition forces kept moving, kept pursuing the enemy and routing out the terrorists in other parts of Iraq.

Unfortunately, in 2004 the local security forces there in Tal Afar weren't able to maintain order, and so the terrorists and the insurgents eventually moved back into the town. Because the terrorists threatened to murder the families of Tal Afar's police, its members rarely ventured out from the headquarters in an old Ottoman fortress. The terrorists also took over local mosques, forcing local imams out and insisting that the terrorist message of hatred and intolerance and violence be spread from the mosques. The same happened in Tal Afar's schools, where the terrorists eliminated real education and instead indoctrinated young men in their hateful ideology. By November 2004, two months after our operation to clear the city, the terrorists had returned to continue their brutal campaign of intimidation.

The return of al Qaeda meant the innocent civilians in Tal Afar were in a difficult position. Just put yourself



in the shoes of the citizens of Tal Afar as all this was happening. On the one side, you hear coalition and Iraqi forces saying they're coming to protect you -- but they'd already come in once, and they had not stopped the terrorists from coming back. You worry that when the coalition goes after the terrorists, you or your family may be caught in the crossfire, and your city might be destroyed. You don't trust the police. You badly want to believe the coalition forces really can help you out, but three decades of Saddam's brutal rule have taught you a lesson: Don't stick your neck out for anybody.

On the other side, you see the terrorists and the insurgents. You know they mean business. They control the only hospital in town. You see that the mayor and other political figures are collaborating with the terrorists. You see how the people who worked as interpreters for the coalition forces are beheaded. You see a popular city councilman gunned down in front of his horrified wife and children. You see a respected Sheik and an Imam kidnapped and murdered. You see the terrorists deliberately firing mortars into playgrounds and soccer fields filled with children. You see communities becoming armed enclaves. If you are in a part of Tal Afar that was not considered friendly, you see that the terrorists cut off your basic services like electricity and water. You and your family feel besieged and you see no way out.

The savagery of the terrorists and insurgents who controlled Tal Afar is really hard for Americans to imagine. They enforced their rule through fear and intimidation -- and women and children were not spared. In one grim incident, the terrorists kidnapped a young boy from the hospital and killed him. And then they booby-trapped his body and placed him along a road where his family would see him. And when the boy's father came to retrieve his son's body, he was blown up. These weren't random acts of violence; these were deliberate and highly organized attempts to maintain control through intimidation. In Tal Afar, the terrorists had schools for kidnapping and beheading and laying IEDs. And they sent a clear message to the citizens of the city: Anyone who dares oppose their reign of terror will be murdered.



As they enforced their rule by targeting civilians, they also preyed upon adolescents craving affirmation. Our troops found one Iraqi teenager who was taken from his family by the terrorists. The terrorists routinely abused him and violated his dignity. The terrorists offered him a chance to prove his manhood -- by holding the legs of captives as they were beheaded. When our forces interviewed this boy, he told them that his greatest aspiration was to be promoted to the killer who would behead the bound captives. Al Qaeda's idea of manhood may be fanatical and perverse, but it served two clear purposes: It helped provide recruits willing to commit any atrocity, and it enforced the rule of fear.

The result of this barbarity was a city where normal life had virtually ceased. Colonel H.R. McMaster of the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment described it this way: "When you come into a place in the grip of al Qaeda, you see a ghost town. There are no children playing in the streets.

Shops are closed and boarded. All construction is stopped. People stay inside, prisoners in their own homes." This is the brutal reality that al Qaeda wishes to impose on all the people of Iraq.

The ability of al Qaeda and its associates to retake Tal Afar was an example of something we saw elsewhere in Iraq. We recognized the problem, and we changed our strategy. Instead of coming in and removing the terrorists, and then moving on, the Iraqi government and the coalition adopted a new approach called clear, hold, and build. This new approach was made possible because of the significant gains made in training large numbers of highly capable Iraqi security forces. Under this new approach, Iraq and coalition -- Iraqi and coalition forces would clear a city of the terrorists, leave well-trained Iraqi units behind to hold the city, and work with local leaders to build the economic and political infrastructure Iraqis need to live in freedom.

One of the first tests of this new approach was Tal Afar. In May 2005, Colonel McMaster's unit was given responsibility for the western part of Nineveh Province where Tal Afar is located, and two months later Iraq's national government announced that a major offensive to clear the city of the terrorists and insurgents would soon be launched. Iraqi and coalition forces first met with tribal leaders and local residents to listen to their grievances. One of the biggest complaints was the police force, which rarely ventured out of its headquarters. When it did venture, it was mostly to carry out sectarian reprisals. And so the national government sent out new leaders to head the force. The new leaders set about getting rid of the bad elements, and building a professional police force that all sides could have confidence in. We recognized it was important to listen to the representatives of Tal Afar's many ethnic and religious groups. It's an important part of helping to remove one of the leading sources of mistrust.



Next, Iraqi and army coalition forces spent weeks preparing for what they knew would be a tough military offensive. They built an 8-foot high, 12-mile long dirt wall that ringed the city. This wall was designed to cut off any escape for terrorists trying to evade security checkpoints. Iraqi and coalition forces also built temporary housing outside the city, so that Tal Afar's people would have places to go when the fighting started. Before the assault on the city, Iraqi and coalition forces initiated a series of operations in surrounding towns to eliminate safe havens and make it harder for fleeing terrorists to hide. These steps took time, but as life returned to these outlying towns, these operations helped persuade the population of Tal Afar that Iraqi and coalition forces were on their side against a common enemy: the extremists who had taken control of their city and their lives.

Only after all these steps did Iraqi and coalition authorities launch Operation Restoring Rights to clear the city of the terrorists. Iraqi forces took the lead. The primary force was 10 Iraqi battalions, backed by three coalition battalions. Many Iraqi units conducted their own anti-terrorist operations and controlled their own battle space, hunting for the enemy fighters and securing neighborhoods block by block. Throughout the operation, Iraqi and coalition forces were careful to hold their fire to let civilians pass safely out of the city. By focusing on securing the safety of Tal Afar's population, the Iraqi and coalition forces begin to win the trust of the city's residents -- which is critical to defeating the terrorists who were hiding among them.

After about two weeks of intense activity, coalition and Iraqi forces had killed about 150 terrorists and captured 850 more. The operation uncovered weapons caches loaded with small arms ammunition and ski masks, RPG rockets, grenade and machine gun ammunition, and fuses and batteries for making IEDs. In one cache we found an axe inscribed with the names of the victims the terrorists had beheaded. And the operation accomplished all this while protecting innocent civilians and inflicting minimal damage on the city.

After the main combat operations were over, Iraqi forces moved in to hold the city. Iraqis' government deployed more than a thousand Iraqi army soldiers and emergency police to keep order, and they were supported by a newly restored police force that would eventually grow to about 1,700 officers. As part of the new strategy we embedded coalition forces with the Iraqi police and with the army units patrolling Tal Afar to work with their Iraqi counterparts and to help them become more capable and more professional. In the weeks and months that followed, the Iraqi police built stations throughout Tal Afar -- and city residents began stepping forward to offer testimony against captured terrorists, and inform soldiers about where the remaining terrorists were hiding.

Inside the old Ottoman fortress, a Joint Coordination Center manned by Iraqi army and Iraqi police and coalition forces answers the many phone calls that now come into a new tip line. As a result of the tips, when someone tries to plant an IED in Tal Afar, it's often reported and disabled before it can do any harm. The Iraqi forces patrolling the cities are effective because they know the people, they know the language and they know the culture. And by turning control of these cities over to capable Iraqi troops and police, we give Iraqis confidence that they can determine their own destiny -- and that frees up coalition forces to hunt the high-value targets like Zarqawi.

The recent elections show us how Iraqis respond when they know they're safe. Tal Afar is the largest city in Western Nineveh Province. In the elections held in January 2005, of about 190,000 registered voters, only 32,000 people went to the polls. Only Fallujah had a lower participation rate. By the time of the October referendum on the constitution and the December elections, Iraqi and coalition forces had secured Tal Afar and surrounding areas. The number of registered voters rose to about 204,000 -- and more than 175,000 turned out to vote in each election, more than 85 percent of the eligible voters in Western Nineveh Province. These citizens turned out because they were determined to have a say in their nation's future, and they cast their ballots at polling stations that were guarded and secured by fellow Iraqis.

One young teacher described the change this way: "What you see here is hope -- the hope that Iraq will become safer and fairer. I feel very confident when I see so many people voting."

The confidence that has been restored to the people of Tal Afar is crucial to their efforts to rebuild their city. Immediately following the military operations, we helped the Iraqis set up humanitarian relief for the civilian population. We also set up a fund to reimburse innocent Iraqi families for damage done to their homes and businesses in the fight against the terrorists. The Iraqi government pledged \$50 million to help reconstruct Tal Afar by paving roads, and rebuilding hospitals and schools, and by improving infrastructure from the electric grid to sewer and water systems. With their city now more secure, the people of Tal Afar are beginning to rebuild a better future for themselves and their children.

See, if you're a resident of Tal Afar today, this is what you're going to see: You see that the terrorist who once exercised brutal control over every aspect of your city has been killed or captured, or driven out, or put on the run. You see your children going to school and playing safely in the streets. You see the electricity and water service restored throughout the city. You see a police force that better reflects the ethnic and religious diversity of the communities they patrol. You see markets opening, and you hear the sound of construction equipment as buildings go up and homes are remade. In short, you see a city that is coming back to life.

The success of Tal Afar also shows how the three elements of our strategy in Iraq -- political, security, and economic -- depend on and reinforce one another. By working with local leaders to address community grievances, Iraqi and coalition forces helped build the political support needed to make the military operation a success. The military success against the terrorists helped give the citizens of Tal Afar security, and this allowed them to vote in the elections and begin to rebuild their city. And the economic rebuilding that is beginning to take place is giving Tal Afar residents a real stake in the success of a free Iraq. And as all this happens, the terrorists, those who offer nothing but destruction and death, are becoming marginalized.

The strategy that worked so well in Tal Afar did not emerge overnight -- it came only after much trial and error. It took time to understand and adjust to the brutality of the enemy in Iraq. Yet the strategy is working. And we know it's working because the people of Tal Afar are showing their gratitude for the good work that Americans have given on their behalf. A recent television report followed a guy named Captain Jesse Sellars on patrol, and described him as a "pied piper" with crowds of Iraqi children happily chanting his name as he greets locals with the words "Salaam alaikum," which mean "peace be with you."

When the newswoman asks the local merchant what would have happened a few months earlier if he'd been seen talking with an American, his answer was clear: "They'd have cut off my head, they would have beheaded me." Like thousands of others in Tal Afar, this man knows the true meaning of liberation.

Recently, Senator Joe Biden said that America cannot want peace for Iraqis more than they want it for themselves. I agree with that. And the story of Tal Afar shows that when Iraqis can count on a basic level of safety and security, they can live together peacefully. We saw this in Tal Afar after the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra. Unlike other parts of Iraq, in Tal Afar the reaction was subdued, with few reports of sectarian violence. Actually, on the Friday after the attack, more than a thousand demonstrators gathered in Tal Afar to protest the attack peacefully.

The terrorists have not given up in Tal Afar, and they may yet succeed in exploding bomb or provoking acts of sectarian violence. The people of the city still have many challenges to overcome, including old-age [sic] resentments that still create suspicion, an economy that needs to create jobs and opportunity for its young, and determined enemies who will continue trying to foment a civil war to move back in. But the people of Tal Afar have shown why spreading liberty and democracy is at the heart of our strategy to defeat the terrorists. The people of Tal Afar have shown that Iraqis do want peace and freedom, and no one should underestimate them.

I wish I could tell you that the progress made in Tal Afar is the same in every single part of Iraq. It's not. Though most of the country has remained relatively peaceful, in some parts of Iraq the enemy is carrying out savage acts of violence, particularly in Baghdad and the surrounding areas of Baghdad. But the progress made in bringing more Iraqi security forces online is helping to bring peace and stability to Iraqi cities. The example of Tal Afar gives me confidence in our strategy, because in this city we see the outlines of the Iraq that we and the Iraqi people have been fighting for: a free and secure people who are getting back on their feet, who are participating in government and civic life, and who have become allies in the fight against the terrorists.

I believe that as Iraqis continue to see the benefits of liberty they will gain confidence in their future -- and they will work to ensure that common purpose trumps narrow sectarianism. And by standing with them in their hour of need, we're going to help the Iraqis build a strong democracy that will be an inspiration throughout the Middle East; a democracy that will be a partner in the global war against the terrorists.

The kind of progress that we and the Iraqi people are making in places like Tal Afar is not easy to capture in a short clip on the evening news. Footage of children playing, or shops opening, and people resuming their normal lives will never be as dramatic as the footage of an IED explosion, or the destruction of a mosque, or soldiers and civilians being killed or injured. The enemy understands this, and it explains their continued acts of violence in Iraq. Yet the progress we and the Iraqi people are making is also real. And those in a position to know best are the Iraqis, themselves.

One of the most eloquent is the Mayor of Tal Afar, a courageous Iraqi man named Najim. Mayor Najim arrived in the city in the midst of the al Qaeda occupation, and he knows exactly what our troops have helped accomplish. He calls our men and women in uniform "lion-hearts," and in a letter to the troopers of the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment, he spoke of a friendship sealed in blood and sacrifice. As Mayor Najim had this to say to the families of our fallen: "To the families of those who have given their holy blood for our land, we all bow to you in reverence and to the souls of your loved ones. Their sacrifice was not in vain. They are not dead, but alive, and their souls [are] hovering around us every second of every minute. They will not be forgotten for giving their precious lives. They have sacrificed that which is most valuable. We see them in the smile of every child, and in every flower growing in this land. Let America, their families, and the world be proud of their sacrifice for humanity and life." America is proud of that sacrifice, and we're proud to have allies like Mayor Najim on our side in the fight for freedom.

Yesterday we marked the third anniversary of the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. At the time there is much to -- this time, there's much discussion in our country about the removal of Saddam Hussein from power and our remaining mission in Iraq. The decision to remove Saddam Hussein was a difficult decision; the decision to remove Saddam Hussein was the right decision. (Applause.)

Before we acted, his regime was defying U.N. resolutions calling for it to disarm; it was violating cease-fire agreements, was firing on British and American pilots which were enforcing no-fly zones. Saddam Hussein was a leader who brutalized his people, had pursued and used weapons of mass destruction, and sponsored terrorism. Today Saddam Hussein is no longer oppressing his people or threatening the world. He's being tried for his crimes by the free citizens of a free Iraq -- and America and our allies are safer for it. (Applause.)

The last three years have tested our resolve. The fighting has been tough. The enemy we face has proved to be brutal and relentless. We're adapting our approach to reflect the hard realities on the ground. And the sacrifice being made by our young men and women who wear our uniform has been heartening and inspiring.

The terrorists who are setting off bombs in mosques and markets in Iraq share the same hateful ideology as the terrorists who attacked us on September the 11th, 2001, those who blew up commuters in London and Madrid, and those who murdered tourists in Bali, or workers in Riyadh, or guests at a wedding in Amman, Jordan. In the war on terror we face a global enemy -- and if we were not fighting this enemy in Iraq, they would not be idle. They would be plotting and trying to kill Americans across the world and within our own borders. Against this enemy, there can be no compromise. So we will fight them in Iraq, we'll fight them across the world, and we will stay in the fight until the fight is won.

In the long run, the best way to defeat this enemy and to ensure the security of our own citizens is to spread the hope of freedom across the broader Middle East. We've seen freedom conquer evil and secure the peace before. In World War II, free nations came together to fight the ideology of fascism, and freedom prevailed. And today, Germany and Japan are democracies -- and they are allies in securing the peace. In the Cold War, freedom defeated the ideology of communism and led to a democratic movement that freed the nations of Central and Eastern Europe from Soviet domination. And today, these nations are strong allies in the war on terror.

In the Middle East, freedom is once again contending with an ideology that seeks to sow anger and hatred and despair. And like fascism and communism before, the hateful ideologies that use terror will be defeated. Freedom will prevail in Iraq; freedom will prevail in the Middle East; and as the hope of freedom spreads to nations that have not known it, these countries will become allies in the cause of peace.

The security of our country is directly linked to the liberty of the Iraqi people -- and we will settle for nothing less than victory. Victory will come when the terrorists and Saddamists can no longer threaten Iraq's democracy, when the Iraqi security forces can provide for the safety of their citizens on their own, and when Iraq is not a safe haven for terrorists to plot new attacks against our nation. There will be more days of sacrifice and tough fighting before the victory is achieved. Yet by helping the Iraqis defeat the terrorists in their land, we bring greater security to our own.

As we make progress toward victory, Iraqis will continue to take more responsibility for their own security, and fewer U.S. forces will be needed to complete the mission. But it's important for the Iraqis to hear this: The United States will not abandon Iraq. We will not leave that country to the terrorists who attacked America and want to attack us again. We will leave Iraq, but when we do, it will be from a position of strength, not weakness. Americans have never retreated in the face of thugs and assassins, and we will not begin now. (Applause.)

Thanks for listening. (Applause.) And I'll be glad to answer some questions, if you have any.

Yes, ma'am.

Q Thank you for coming to Cleveland, Mr. President, and to the City Club. My question is that author and former Nixon administration official Kevin Phillips, in his latest book, *American Theocracy*, discusses what has been called radical Christianity and its growing involvement into government and politics. He makes the point that members of your administration have reached out to prophetic Christians who see the war in Iraq and the rise of terrorism as signs of the apocalypse. Do you believe this, that the war in Iraq and the rise of terrorism are signs of the apocalypse? And if not, why not?

THE PRESIDENT: The answer is -- I haven't really thought of it that way. (Laughter.) Here's how I think of it. The first I've heard of that, by the way. I guess I'm more of a practical fellow. I vowed after September the 11th, that I would do everything I could to protect the American people. And my attitude, of course, was affected by the attacks. I knew we were at war. I knew that the enemy, obviously, had to be sophisticated and lethal to fly hijacked airplanes into facilities that would be killing thousands of people, innocent people, doing nothing, just sitting there going to work.

I also knew this about this war on terror, that the farther we got away from September the 11th, the more likely it is people would seek comfort and not think about this global war on terror as a global war on terror. And that's good, by the way. It's hard to take risk if you're a small business owner, for example, if you're worried that the next attack is going to come tomorrow. I understand that. But I also understand my most important job, the most important job of any President today, and I predict down the road, is to protect America.

And so I told the American people that we would find the terrorists and bring them to justice, and that we needed to defeat them overseas so we didn't have to face them here at home. I also understood that the war on terror requires some clear doctrine. And one of the doctrines that I laid out was, if you harbor a terrorist, you're equally as guilty as the terrorist. And the first time that doctrine was really challenged was in Afghanistan. I guess the Taliban didn't believe us -- or me. And so we acted. Twenty-five million people are now free, and Afghanistan is no longer a safe haven for the terrorists.

And the other doctrine that's really important, and it's a change of attitude -- it's going to require a change of attitude for a while -- is that, when you see a threat, you got to deal with it before it hurts you. Foreign policy used to be dictated by the fact we had two oceans protecting us. If we saw a threat, you could deal with it if you needed to, you think -- or not. But we'd be safe.

My most important job is to protect you, is to protect the American people. Therefore, when we see threats, given the lesson of September the 11th, we got to deal with them. That does not mean militarily, necessarily. Obviously, the first option for a President has got to be the full use of diplomacy. That's what you're watching in Iran right now. I see a threat in Iran. I see it there -- I'm kind of getting off subject here, not because I don't want to answer your question, but kind of -- I guess, that's what happens in Washington, we get a little long-winded. (Laughter.)

But now that I'm on Iran, the threat to Iran, of course -- (applause) -- the threat from Iran is, of course, their stated objective to destroy our strong ally Israel. That's a threat, a serious threat. It's a threat to world peace; it's a threat, in essence, to a strong alliance. I made it clear, I'll make it clear again, that we will use military might to protect our ally, Israel, and -- (applause.)

At any rate, our objective is to solve this issue diplomatically. And so our message must be a united message, a message from not only the United States, but also Great Britain and France and Germany, as well as Russia, hopefully, and China, in order to say, loud and clear to the Iranians, this is unacceptable behavior. Your desire to have a nuclear weapon is unacceptable.

And so, to answer your question, I take a practical view of doing the job you want me to do -- which is how do we defeat an enemy that still wants to hurt us; and how do we deal with threats before they fully materialize; what do we do to protect us from harm? That's my job. And that job came home on September the 11th, for me -- loud and clear. And I think about my job of protecting you every day -- every single day of the presidency, I'm concerned about the safety of the American people.

Yes, sir.

Q Mr. President, at the beginning of your talk today you mentioned that you understand why Americans have had their confidence shaken by the events in Iraq. And I'd like to ask you about events that occurred three years ago that might also explain why confidence has been shaken. Before we went to war in Iraq we said there were three main reasons for going to war in Iraq: weapons of mass destruction, the claim that Iraq was sponsoring terrorists who had attacked us on 9/11, and that Iraq had purchased nuclear materials from Niger. All three of those turned out to be false. My question is, how do we restore confidence that Americans may have in their leaders and to be sure that the information they are getting now is correct?

THE PRESIDENT: That's a great question. (Applause.) First, just if I might correct a misperception. I don't think we ever said -- at least I know I didn't say that there was a direct connection between September the 11th and Saddam Hussein. We did say that he was a state sponsor of terror -- by the way, not declared a state sponsor of terror by me, but declared by other administrations. We also did say that Zarqawi, the man who is now wreaking havoc and killing innocent life, was in Iraq. And so the state sponsor of terror was a declaration by a previous administration. But I don't want to be argumentative, but I was very careful never to say that Saddam Hussein ordered the attacks on America.

Like you, I asked that very same question, where did we go wrong on intelligence. The truth of the matter is the whole world thought that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. It wasn't just my administration, it was the previous administration. It wasn't just the previous administration; you might remember, sir, there was a Security Council vote of 15 to nothing that said to Saddam Hussein, disclose, disarm, or face serious consequences. The basic premise was, you've got weapons. That's what we thought.

When he didn't disclose, and when he didn't disarm, and when he deceived inspectors, it sent a very disconcerting message to me, whose job it is to protect the American people and to take threats before they fully materialize. My view is, he was given the choice of whether or not he would face reprisal. It was his decision to make. And so he chose to not disclose, not disarm, as far as everybody was concerned.

Your question, however, the part that's really important is, how do we regain credibility when it comes to intelligence? Obviously, the Iranian issue is a classic case, where we've got to make sure that when we speak there's credibility. And so, in other words, when the United States rallies a coalition, or any other country that had felt that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction is trying to rally a coalition in dealing with one of these non-transparent societies, what do we need to do to regain the trust of not only the American people, but the world community?

And so what I did was I called together the Silberman-Robb Commission -- Laurence Silberman and former Senator Chuck Robb -- to take a full look at what went right and what went wrong on the intelligence, and how do we structure an intelligence network that makes sure there's full debate among the analysts? How do we make sure that there's a full compilation of data points that can help decision-makers like myself feel comfortable in the decision we make?

The war on terror requires the collection and analysis of good intelligence. This is a different kind of war; we're dealing with an enemy which hides in caves and plots and plans, an enemy which doesn't move in flotillas, or battalions. And so, therefore, the intelligence-gathering is not only important to make a diplomatic case, it's really important to be able to find an enemy before they hurt us.

And so there was a reform process they went through, a full analysis of what -- of how the operations worked, and out of that came the NDI, John Negroponte and Mike Hayden. And their job is to better collate and make sure that the intelligence-gathering is seamless across a variety of gatherers and people that analyze. But the credibility of our country is essential -- I agree with you.

Yes, sure.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Welcome to Cleveland. It's an honor to have you here. I represent the Cleveland Hungarian Revolution 50th Anniversary --

THE PRESIDENT: That's good. I was there, by the way.

Q Thank you. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: At least for the celebration in Capitol -- with Tom Lantos. But go ahead.

Q Mr. President, in the interest of free speech if you'll indulge me, I have to give a little context of my question. On this third anniversary of your -- I consider -- courageous initiative to bring freedom and basic human dignity to the Iraqi people, the image of the statue of the tyrant Saddam falling in Baghdad was very reminiscent of another statue, another tyrant, Josef Stalin, who fell in Budapest 50 years ago at the hands of many young Hungarian freedom fighters who were seeking to overthrow the tyranny of Soviet communism. Mr. President, just like our brave fighting men and women today, and many Iraqi people, those young Hungarian patriots paid a very heavy price for a few days of freedom. But they lit the torch that eventually set the captive nations on the path to achieving liberty. And so, Mr. President, our Cleveland Hungarian community is planning a major event in Cleveland in October -- (laughter) --

THE PRESIDENT: The guy sees the moment, you know -- (laughter and applause.)

Q Right.

THE PRESIDENT: I'm not sure what I'm doing in October. Put me down as a maybe. (Laughter and applause.) Sorry to interrupt.

Q Just like you came for the children's game in 2004, we hope to have you hear for that, as well. Mr. President, just want to let you know, to win the war on terror we feel that what was started in 1776, and continued in 1956, must be remembered in 2006.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. (Applause.)

Q I'm at the question now. Thanks for your indulgence.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, good. (Laughter.)

Q My basic question is, how can we help you, from the grassroots level, how can we help you promote the cause of freedom and liberty for all peoples throughout the world?

THE PRESIDENT: I appreciate that. My main job is to make sure I make the case as plainly as I can why it's worth it. And I fully understand -- I understand people being disheartened when they turn on their TV screen and see the loss of innocent life. We're compassionate people. Nobody likes beheadings and it -- nobody -- when innocent children get car-bombed. So it's my job, sir, to make it clear about the connection between Iraq and the war on terror. It's my job to remind people that progress is being made, in spite of the violence they see. It's my job to make it clear to the people the stakes.

I've spent time talking about what happens if we were to lose our nerve, and Iraq would fall to al Qaeda. And the stakes are high. Look, I

understand some don't view that we're in a war against the terrorists. I know that. And therefore, there's a sense that 9/11 might have been an isolated incident. I just don't agree. And here's what I -- here's the basis from which I made decisions. You heard one -- is that 9/11 affected the way I think. I know these are like totalitarian fascists; they have an ideology, they have a desire to spread that ideology, and they're willing to use tactics to achieve their strategy.

And one of the tactics I said early on in the speech -- the stated objectives of al Qaeda. This isn't my imagination of their strategy, this is what they have told us. And I presume you want the Commander-in-Chief to take the words of the enemy seriously. And they have told us they believe that we're soft and that with time we'll leave, and they'll fill the vacuum. And they want to plan and plot and hurt Americans. That's what they have said. And I think it's really important we take their words very seriously.

And so I will continue making the case, sir, but the best way you can help is to support our troops. You find a family who's got a child in the United States military, tell them you appreciate them. Ask them if you can help them. You see somebody wearing a uniform, you walk up and say, thanks for serving the country.

Ours is a remarkable country where -- (applause) -- where we've got thousands of people signing up, volunteering for the United States military, many of them after September the 11th, knowing full-well what they were signing up for. And what's amazing about our military is that retention rates are high, people are still signing up. They want to -- they want to defend the country. And for that, I am grateful.

But my job, sir, is to lay out the strategy -- and to connect the notion of liberty with peace. And that's hard for some. Sometimes there's a little bit of a -- kind of a point of view that says, well, maybe certain people can't be free, maybe certain people can't self-govern. I strongly believe that liberty is universal. I believe in the natural rights of men and women. That was part of our founding. And if you believe in that, if you believe in the universality of freedom, then I believe those of us who are free have an obligation to help others become free. (Applause.)

Yes, ma'am. I'm tied up in October, but you know -- (laughter.)

Q I'm a Marine mom --

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, good. Tell your -- (applause.)

Q My son signed up after 9/11, and I didn't raise a terrorist. And let's face it, there's a continuum and a lack of clarity about who's violent and who's a terrorist. And we really do want to use the word "enemy" in a meaningful way. I think your speech has been very brave and very important and very clarifying. And in the interest of clarifying the purpose of our country to fight preventive war, which we know does involve violence, it's very important for us to understand what you're saying about your model community in Iraq. And my question is that you are killing the bad guys, and that's very important that's the entire story of the battle. And we want to know who the bad guys are. Do you feel that Iraq is like a honeycomb, and that we can draw the al Qaeda there so we can stand and fight them there? I'm really asking for clarification.

THE PRESIDENT: Sure. I think in Iraq there are three types of folks that are trying to stop democracy. First of all, I think it's very important for people to understand one reason they're so violent and desperate is because they're trying to stop a society based upon liberty. And you got to ask why. And the reason why is because it's the exact opposite of what they believe.

There are three types. One is al Qaeda and al Qaeda is headed into there. Al Qaeda understands the danger of democracy spreading. And so Zarqawi, this fellow named Zarqawi is in charge of al Qaeda inside of Iraq which recruits foreign fighters. And they headed into Iraq because they wanted to fight us. They wanted to stop democracy.

Secondly, there are Saddamists -- these were the folks that really enjoyed a life of privilege. These are people that were top of the heap. They were -- they represented a minority in the country, but they got all the deal, they got all the goods. And they don't like it when Saddam was removed. And so they are trying to regroup.

And the third group are rejectionists. These are essentially Sunnis, as well, who really weren't sure as -- about whether or not it meant -- what it meant to have minority rights, whether or not they'd be protected. You can understand. They didn't -- during Saddam, there was no such thing as minority rights. And so as a new society emerged, they were doubtful.

And it is those folks that I believe will become marginalized as democracy advances. We're seeing the Sunnis change their mind about things. They barely voted in the first January 2005 elections; they participated overwhelmingly in the December 2005 elections. In just an 11-month period of time there was a change of attitude to participate in the democratic process.

And the fundamental question that I know people ask is whether or not democracy, one, can take hold in Iraq, and two, will it change people's attitude about the future? And I believe it will. History has proven that democracies can change societies. The classic case I like to cite is Japan. Prime Minister Koizumi is one of my best buddies in the international arena, and when we sit down, we talk the peace. I find it interesting that he is a peacemaker with me on a variety of issues, and yet my Dad fought the Japanese. And I'm sure many of your relatives did, as well.

Sixty years ago, Japan was the sworn enemy of the United States. Today, they're an ally in peace. And what took place? Well, what took place was a Japanese-style democracy. I can't say I promise you this, but I suspect that if somebody were standing up at the City Club of Cleveland talking about, don't worry some day Japan is going to be peaceful with the United States and the 43rd President is going to be designing how keep the peace -- they'd say, get him off the stage. (Laughter.) What's he thinking? They're the sworn enemy. And now they're our ally. So I have faith in the capacity of democracies to help change societies.

And again, I repeat to you, the debate -- one of the debates is whether or not certain folks can self-govern. There's kind of a -- maybe there are some in the world that aren't capable, say the skeptics. I strongly disagree with that. I believe there's -- hold on a second -- I believe there's a great desire for people to be free. I believe that. And history has proven that democracies don't war with each other. Again, I kind of glossed over this, but particularly for the students here, look at what happened in Europe over a hundred-year period, from the early 1900s to today. Europe was at war twice that cost Americans thousands of lives. Today, they don't war because the systems of government changed. Democracies are at peace. Europe is whole, free, and at peace. And that's an important history lesson for those of us.

What I'm saying to you, ma'am, is that there is a battle for Iraq now, but it's just a part of the war on terror. It's a theater in the war on terror. Afghanistan was a theater. And we're in a global battle which requires strong alliances, good cooperation, and a constant reminder of the nature of this war. So today I met with the Secretary General of NATO. And the first subject that came up was the war on terror, and how much I appreciated

NATO's contribution to helping Afghanistan succeed. But it is -- the enemy in this case is disgruntled folks inside of Iraq, coupled with an al Qaeda presence there that wants to harm Americans again.

I don't know -- is your son still in the military?

Q Yes, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Thanks. You tell him the Commander-in-Chief is proud of him. You tell him to listen to his mother, too. (Applause.)

Yes. First, and then second, sir, you're next.

Q On behalf of the students here from various high school student leadership programs, we thank you for speaking with us here at the City Club of Cleveland.

THE PRESIDENT: Thanks -- I hope it's a convenient excuse to skip school, but -- (laughter.)

Q Mr. President, with the war in Iraq costing \$19,600 per U.S. household, how do you expect a generation of young people such as ourselves, to afford college a time like this, when we're paying for a war Iraq?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. Well -- hold on for a minute. Hold on. We can do more than one thing at one time. And when you grow your economy, like we're growing our economy, there is an opportunity to not only protect ourselves, but also to provide more Pell grants than any administration in our nation's history, and increase the student loan program. So if you take a look, I think you'll find that we're robust in helping -- at the federal level, helping people go to college. And it's essential you go to college. It's essential that there be a group of youngsters coming up that are well-educated so that we can maintain our economic leadership position in the world. We've got a robust program to do just that.

But it's also essential that we keep policies in place that keep the economy growing. This economy of ours is strong, and it's -- it is, in my judgment, growing stronger. But it is possible to put policy in place that would weaken it, such as raising taxes. I think we got to keep taxes low to keep the economy moving. It's possible to put policy -- (applause) -- it's possible to put policy in place that would hurt this economy, like protectionist policy. It's possible to -- if we keep suing our people trying to risk capital, it's conceivable, we won't be the leader. That's why we need good tort reform. We got to make sure that -- (applause.)

My point to you is economic growth enables us to do more than one thing. And that's what we'll continue to do.

Yes, sir. Right. No, no, hold on for a minute. Hold on for a minute.

Q Thank you, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, sir.

Q Every chief needs Indian on their side. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: How long were you working on that for? (Laughter and applause.)

Q I applaud your vision and foresight to sign a long-term treaty with India. But, sir, I am confused that, on one side, you're helping democratic countries to flourish and establish democracy in the world market, whereas how do we deal with country who has known to harbor terrorism like Pakistan?

THE PRESIDENT: I thought you might be heading there. (Laughter.) I, obviously, had a trip recently to India and Pakistan and Afghanistan, and was able to say in India and in Pakistan both, it is a positive development for America to be a friend of Pakistan -- it's a positive development for India for America to be a friend of Pakistan, and it's a positive development for Pakistan for America to be a friend of India. It's an important accomplishment in order to help keep the peace.

I don't view our relationships with Pakistan and India as a zero-sum relationship. As a matter of fact, I view our relationships with both countries as different sets of issues and the need to nurture both relationships to achieve common objectives. And we're in a position to be able to do so now.

President Musharraf is a friend to the United States. President Musharraf understands that he must help rout out al Qaeda, which is hiding in parts of his country. President Musharraf was reminded of that the four times al Qaeda tried to kill him. He is a -- and so I was able to have a very good discussion with the President about our mutual concerns in the war on terror. And it's important that that dialogue go on. It's a very important part of our -- me doing my most important job, which is to protect you.

He also said in a press conference that he understands that democracy is important. So one of the conversations that I had with him in private -- I feel comfortable saying this in public because he himself brought it up -- was the need for democracy to advance in Pakistan. History has -- showed us that democracies don't war.

What's interesting about the relationship between Pakistan and India -- and I'll get to India in a minute, I want to say something on India, so thanks for bringing it up -- is that when we first -- when I first got into office, I remember asking Colin Powell to go get in between India and Pakistan. There was a lot of noise -- you might remember, I think it was '01 or '02, where there was deep concerns about -- I think '01 -- deep concerns about a potential nuclear conflict. And so there was shuttle diplomacy, back and forth between India and Pakistan, including not only our -- Colin, but also Jack Straw, the Foreign Minister of Great Britain. And you never know how dangerous one of these situations can become until it's too late, but, nevertheless, we took it very seriously.

And today you don't see the need for the United States shuffling, or Britain shuffling diplomats back and forth, to walk back -- walk the two countries back from a potential conflict which would be incredibly damaging for the world. That's positive. In other words, it's -- and I give Prime Minister -- President Musharraf credit, and I give the Indian Prime Ministers -- both Vajpayee and the current Prime Minister -- credit for -- Prime Minister Singh -- for envisioning what is possible, how is it possible to develop a relationship that's a peaceful relationship with our neighbor.

And, sir, I think it's very important for the United States to stay engaged with Pakistan and encourage them. We're trying to negotiate an investment

treaty with them, with the hopes of being able to eventually develop more trade with Pakistan, in the belief that trade helps nations develop stability, and prosperity is achieved through trade.

India -- the visit there was a very important visit. And I want to describe to you right quick, so be careful on the questions. You're going to have to -- you'll leave your hand up for a while, I agreed with the Indian government that India ought to be encouraged to develop a nuclear power industry. And that's a controversial decision on my part, because it basically flies in the face of old Cold War attitudes, as well as arm control thinking.

Let me just share the logic with you. First of all, in that we live in a global economy, there is a demand for fossil fuels -- an increase in the demand for fossil fuels in one part of the world affects the price of gasoline in our world. We're connected. Whether people like it or not, there is an interconnectedness today that affects our economy. Somebody's decision overseas affects whether or not people are going to be able to work here in America. So I think it makes sense for the United States, as we ourselves become less addicted to oil and fossil fuels, which I'm serious about, encourage others to do so, as well. And one good way to do so, and to protect the environment at the same time, is to encourage the use of safe nuclear power. It's in our interests, our economic interests that we work an agreement with India to encourage their expansion of civilian nuclear power.

Secondly, unlike Iran, for example, India is willing to join the IAEA. They want to be a part of the global agreements around nuclear power. Thirdly, India has got a record a nonproliferation. They've had 30 years of not proliferating. Fourthly, India is a democracy and a transparent society. You find out a lot about India because there's a free press. There is openness. People run for office and are held to account. There's committee hearings. It's an open process.

I feel very comfortable recommending to the United States Congress that it's -- they ought to agree with the agreement that Prime Minister Singh and I have reached. It's important -- it's important -- it's also an important relationship. For too long, America and India were not partners in peace. We didn't deal with each other because of the Cold War. And now is the time to set the Cold War behind us. It's over, folks. It no longer is. And let's think about the next 30 years.

And so my hope is some day somebody will be asking a question, aren't you glad old George W. thought about entering into a strategic relationship with India? And I believe it's in our country's interest that we have such a relationship, and at the same time, maintain close relations with Pakistan. And it's possible to do so. And we are doing so.

Yes, sir.

How long do you usually ask questions here for? (Laughter and applause.)

Q Mr. President --

THE PRESIDENT: The guy is supposed to smile over there. Yes.

Q Another theater in the war on terror is domestic. And there's a controversy around warrantless wiretaps domestically.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q Could you explain why living within the legislation that allowed your administration to get a warrant from a secret court within 72 hours after putting in a wiretap wouldn't be just as effective?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I appreciate the question. He's talking about the terrorist surveillance program that was -- created quite a kerfuffle in the press, and I owe an explanation to. Because our people -- first of all, after September the 11th, I spoke to a variety of folks on the front line of protecting us, and I said, is there anything more we could be doing, given the current laws? And General Mike Hayden of the NSA said there is. The FISA law -- he's referring to the FISA law, I believe -- is -- was designed for a previous period, and is slow and cumbersome in being able to do what Mike Hayden thinks is necessarily -- called hot pursuit.

And so he designed a program that will enable us to listen from a known al Qaeda, or suspected al Qaeda person and/or affiliate, from making any phone call outside the United States in, or inside the United States out -- with the idea of being able to pick up quickly information for which to be able to respond in this environment that we're in. I was concerned about the legality of the program, and so I asked lawyers -- which you got plenty of them in Washington -- (laughter) -- to determine whether or not I could do this legally. And they came back and said, yes. That's part of the debate which you're beginning to see.

I fully understood that Congress needed to be briefed. And so I had Hayden and others brief members of the Congress, both Republicans and Democrats, House members and senators, about the program. The program is under constant review. I sign a reauthorization every -- I'm not exactly sure -- 45 days, say. It's something like that. In other words, it's constantly being reviewed. There's an IG that is very active at the NSA to make sure that the program stays within the bounds that it was designed.

I fully understand people's concerns about it, but ours is a town, by the way, in Washington, where when you don't connect the dots, you're held up to Congress, and when you do connect the dots, you're held up to Congress. I believe what I'm doing is constitutional, and I know it's necessary. And so we're going to keep doing it. (Applause.)

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Your comments today about Iraq have been, for me, very enlightening. And I greatly appreciate the level of clarity that you've provided. But my question is about domestic policy. Today, in our neighborhoods there are terrorists. Children cannot play in some of our neighborhoods. Today, we've got -- when you see post-Katrina, our country was startled at some of the images around poverty in some of our cities. Can you be as clear about your domestic policy to address those kinds of things?

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely. Thanks. Let me start with education, which I view as a vital part of providing hope and eradicating poverty. (Applause.) I was disturbed, when I was the governor of Texas, disturbed about a system that just moved kids through. There was kind of a process-oriented world, that said, okay, if you're 10, you're supposed to be here; you're 12, you're supposed to be here, and on through. It was like -- without any sense of accountability. If you believe education is one of the cornerstones to a hopeful world, then it seems like to me, it makes sense that we've got to have a system that measures so we know whether or not people are getting educated.

So when I got to Washington, I proposed what's called No Child Left Behind, which passed with both Republican and Democrat votes. And the

whole spirit of No Child Left Behind is this: It says, in return for increased federal money for particularly Title I students, we expect you to measure grades three through eight. We want to see strong accountability because we believe every child can learn, and we expect every school to teach. That's the whole spirit of the No Child Left Behind Act.

If you -- it turns out that if you can solve problems early, if you can find out whether or not a curriculum is working or not early on in a child's career, we can correct the problems. And so part of the No Child Left Behind Act is when you measure and find somebody not up to measuring to par, not meeting standards, there's extra money called special service money available in the No Child Left Behind Act, to make sure that there's early tutoring, to make sure that children are not just simply shuffled through, to make sure an accountability system is used properly -- which is to diagnose and solve problems.

The No Child Left Behind Act is beginning to work. You know why? Because we measure. There was an achievement gap in America that's bad for the country. It's an achievement gap between the difference between some Anglo children and some African American children, particularly inner city. That's beginning to close.

We need to apply the same rigor of No Child Left Behind, particularly in middle age [sic] for math and science, to make sure that we're able to compete for the jobs of the 21st century.

And so step one, in my judgment, to address exactly what you described as true -- kind of this enlightenment that, uh-oh, there are parts of our society in which people are, in fact, being completely left behind -- is to make sure the education system is rigorously based upon accountability. And when we find the status quo is unacceptable, have the political courage to change -- demand high standards and change.

And the cornerstone of demanding change in a system that tends to protect itself is measurement. And I realize there are people in my party who want to undo No Child Left Behind. And I'm sure there are in the other party. But my judgment is you can't achieve educational excellence unless you measure and correct problems.

Now, there's another aspect to providing a hopeful society, and that is to encourage ownership. One of the interesting things about Katrina, as you well know, is many of the people displaced did not own their own homes, that they were renters. One of the goals that I set for my administration through a variety of pretty simple programs -- like helping with down payment and education programs, recognizing that interest rates drive most of the housing purchases -- was to encourage minority home ownership. It's now at an all-time high.

I believe that the idea of empowering our faith-based institutions -- government can help, but government sometimes can't find -- well, it just doesn't pass -- it's not a loving organization. And so I believe strongly -- I believe strongly in empowering faith-based and community-based programs all throughout America to help achieve certain objectives.

Mentoring, for example, mentoring of children in prisoners -- whose mother or dad may be in prison is an initiative I started. Drug rehabilitation, giving those who are eligible for drug money a voucher, money themselves, a scrip so they can redeem it at a program that they choose, not that the government assigns them to. In other words, there's a variety of social service programs aimed at lifting people up.

And so I -- look, many Americans kind of were -- didn't really realize what's taking place in parts of the country that you've described. And Katrina was a wake-up call for many Americans. And now there's an opportunity, in my judgment, to take -- well, for people to take notice and put in policy -- put policies in place that help those who need help, like community health centers, or -- for health care -- or expand educational opportunities through rigorous accountability systems, and, I repeat, demanding change where change is due -- needed, and promoting ownership.

Thanks. Good question.

Q -- is no shrinking violet. First of all, I want to commend you on your presentation today. And I tell you I'm 100 percent behind your fight against terrorism. Also --

THE PRESIDENT: Why don't you just leave it at that?

Q Oh, no. Oh, no. (Laughter and applause.)

I tell you, one of the reasons I'm qualified to say that, you probably heard of Ernie Shavers, the boxer. I trained Ernie Shavers. He fought Muhammad Ali, and Muhammad Ali say he hit him so hard he woke up his ancestors in Africa. (Laughter.) So I know a little bit about boxing and things. But I know in boxing -- and I taught over 3,300 children over 13 years, two of them fought for world championships, including Ernie Shavers. I taught them that the best defense is a good offense. That's what you're doing over there now. And I commend you. (Applause.)

My mom and dad had moved from Alabama to Ohio in the mid '40s. They were the parents of five sons. We all served in the military. I served eight years, and we all served honorably. So I am Marine. I've also been a Boy Scout and a firefighter. To lead in, the young person spoke about domestic policy. This Wednesday coming, I'll be making my sixth trip to the New Orleans, Mississippi area as a contractor. I'm president of the Ohio Minority Contracting Association. I want to publicly thank Senator Voinovich right now for directing me to Senator Trent Lott, who has directed me to Haley Barbour, the Governor down there, who opened up opportunities.

We got people doing debris removal, putting on roofs. And I got a \$600,000 proposal to feed 22,000 workers down there who have been underfed. You've been down there. I have, too. People are working 14 and 16 hours a day. And I've never been so proud to be an American, to see the outpouring of people out there helping one another, particularly the faith-based community. So I thank you, appreciate you, and look forward to putting this proposal in your hand. Thank you. (Applause.)

THE PRESIDENT: Well, let's see, I got an invitation and a proposal. (Laughter.)

Yes, sir. Anybody work here in this town? (Laughter and applause.)

Q Sorry about that. Mr. President, I just finished Ambassador Paul Bremer's book, and one of the things I just wanted to say to you and to Ambassador Bremer is thank you for protecting us.

THE PRESIDENT: Thanks. (Applause.)

You're next.

Q Okay, my question is --

THE PRESIDENT: We have dueling microphones here. Keep firing away.

Q Okay. My question is, since 9/11, one of the key things that we need is immigration reform, including comprehensive immigration reform that is right now in front of Senator Specter's committee in the Judiciary. There are two principles I'm hoping that you would support: One, the good people, the engineers, the PhDs, the doctors, the nurses, the people in the system who have followed the rules, will go to the head of the line in any form of immigration reform. That's Title IVz of the bill.

Secondly, the illegals who have not followed the rules -- I understand the debate, I appreciate your statements about immigration reform, but isn't it better that we know who they are, have them finger-printed and photographed, and allow some form of 245I to come back so --

THE PRESIDENT: Tell people what that is. Tell people what 245I is.

Q Okay -- 245I is a partial amnesty program that expired back in 2001, in fact, was going to be voted on on 9/11, unfortunately. But those -- it was a small segment of the illegal population where they would pay the \$1,000 fine and, for example, coming in illegally, then marrying an American citizen, could somehow legalize their status.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay. Let me give you some broad principles on immigration reform as I see them. First of all, we do need to know who's coming into our country and whether they're coming in illegally, or not legally -- legally or not legally -- and whether they're coming in or going out. And part of reforms after September the 11th was a better system of finding out who's coming here.

Secondly, we have a big border between Texas and Mexico that's really hard to enforce. We got to do everything we can to enforce the border, particularly in the south. I mean, it's the place where people are pouring across in order to find work. We have a situation in our own neighborhood where there are way -- disparities are huge, and there are jobs in America that people won't do. That's just a fact. I met an onion grower today at the airport when I arrived, and he said, you got to help me find people that will grow onions -- pluck them, or whatever you do with them, you know. (Laughter.) There are jobs that just simply aren't getting done because Americans won't do them. And yet, if you're making 50 cents an hour in Mexico, and you can make a lot more in America, and you got mouths to feed, you're going to come and try to find the work. It's a big border, of which -- across which people are coming to provide a living for their families.

Step one of any immigration policy is to enforce our border in practical ways. We are spending additional resources to be able to use different detection devices, unmanned UAVs, to help -- and expand Border Patrol, by the way, expand the number of agents on the border, to make sure we're getting them the tools necessary to stop people from coming across in the first place.

Secondly, part of the issue we've had in the past is we've had -- for lack of a better word -- catch and release; the Border Patrol would find people sneaking in; they would then hold them for a period of time; they'd say, come back and check in with us 45 days later, and then they wouldn't check in 45 days later. And they would disappear in society to do the work that some Americans will not do.

And so we're changing catch and release. We're particularly focusing on those from Central America who are coming across Mexico's southern border, ending up in our own -- it's a long answer, but it's an important question: How do we protect our borders, and at the same time, be a humane society?

Anyway, step one, focus on enforcing border; when we find people, send them home, so that the work of our Border Patrol is productive work.

Secondly, it seems like to me that part of having a border security program is to say to people who are hiring people here illegally, we're going to hold you to account. The problem is our employers don't know whether they're hiring people illegally because there's a whole forgery industry around people being smuggled into the United States. There's a smuggling industry and a forgery industry. And it's hard to ask our employers, the onion guy out there, whether or not he's got -- whether or not the documents that he's being shown that look real are real.

And so here's a better proposal than what we're doing today, which is to say, if you're going to come to do a job an American won't do, you ought to be given a foolproof card that says you can come for a limited period of time and do work in a job an American won't do. That's border security because it means that people will be willing to come in legally with a card to do work on a limited basis, and then go home. And so the agents won't be chasing people being smuggled in 18-wheelers or across the Arizona desert. They'll be able to focus on drugs and terrorists and guns.

The fundamental question that he is referring to is, what do we do about -- there's two questions -- one, should we have amnesty? And the answer, in my judgment, is, no, we shouldn't have amnesty. In my judgment, granting amnesty, automatic citizenship -- that's what amnesty means -- would cause another 11 million people, or however many are here, to come in the hopes of becoming a United States citizen. We shouldn't have amnesty. We ought to have a program that says, you get in line like everybody else gets in line; and that if the Congress feels like there needs to be higher quotas on certain nationalities, raise the quotas. But don't let people get in front of the line for somebody who has been playing by the rules. (Applause.)

And so, anyway, that's my advice on good immigration policy. Obviously, there's going to be some questions we have to answer: What about the person who's been here since 1987 -- '86 was the last attempt at coming up with immigration reform -- been here for a long period of time. They've raised a family here. And my only advice for the Congress and for people in the debate is understand what made America. We're a land of immigrants. This guy is from Hungary, you know. (Applause.) And we got to treat people fairly. We've got to have a system of law that is respectful for people.

I mean, the idea of having a program that causes people to get stuck in the back of 18-wheelers, to risk their lives to sneak into America to do work that some people won't do is just not American, in my judgment. And so I would hope the debate would be civil and uphold the honor of this country. And remember, we've been through these periods before, where the immigration debate can get harsh. And it should not be harsh. And I hope -- my call for people is to be rational about the debate and thoughtful about what words can mean during this debate.

Final question, sir. You're paying me a lot of money and I got to go back to work. (Laughter.)

Q My name is Jos Feliciano.

THE PRESIDENT: No.

Q Yes, it is. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Yes -- it's like the time I called a guy and said, hey, this is George Bush calling. He said, come on, quit kidding me, man. (Laughter.) Que quiere decir?

Q -- aqui. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: That's right.

Q And, actually, I'm chairman of the Hispanic Roundtable -- I was going to ask you that same question. However, I'm going to ask you a simple one now, and this relates to preemptive self-defense. How is it, Mr. President, that Iran today is really different from what Iraq was three years ago?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, there were 16 Security Council resolutions. The world had spoken with a clear voice not one time, I think 16 -- is that right, Stretch, 16? I'm asking a member of the press corps. I like to, like, reverse roles sometimes -- (laughter and applause.) Really checking to see if they're paying attention, you know. (Laughter.) Halfway through they kind of start dozing off. (Laughter.)

But the world had spoken by a lot against Saddam Hussein. There was a diplomatic process. You might remember that the Congress, I think in '98, voted a resolution that there should be regime change. My predecessor looked at the same intelligence I looked at and saw a threat. But the difference -- one difference was that in Iraq there was a series of unanimous resolutions that basically held the Iraqi government to account, which Saddam Hussein ignored. It was like resolution after resolution after resolution.

The Iranian issue is just beginning to play out. And my hope, of course, is as I said earlier, that we're able to solve this issue diplomatically. It's very important that the United States work with our allies -- in this case, the lead group of negotiators has been Germany, France, and Great Britain -- so that the Iranians hear a unified voice.

Now, the voice sometimes -- I mean, if you're one -- you're negotiators, probably got some lawyers here who are good negotiators -- it's easier to negotiate one person versus six. I'm not suggesting you're a lawyer, you know, but I kind of had the feeling you might have been. (Laughter.)

And so it's very important for us to continue to make sure that they hear one voice. Non-transparent societies have got an advantage over those of us who are transparent, where every move is in the press, every opinion is aired out. And so it's very important to work to make sure that they hear the one voice. Now, you might have read in the newspapers where our Ambassador in Iraq, Zal, has reached out to the Iranians to make it clear to them about our concerns about involvement in Iraq -- it's very important, however for the Iranians to understand that the discussion is limited to Iraq. We feel like they need to know our position.

Ultimately, Iraq-Iranian relations will be negotiated between the Iraqi government and the Iranian government. Ours is just -- we're using this as an opportunity to make it clear about our concerns of interference within a process that is -- a democratic process that is evolving. Our position is still very clearly that the Iraqis -- Iranians should not have a program to build a nuclear weapon, and/or the capacity, the knowledge necessary to build something which could lead to a nuclear weapon. And we're working closely with our allies and friends to continue to make that clear to them.

So the issues are different. The issues are different stages of diplomacy.

Listen, I've enjoyed this. I hope you have, as well. God bless. (Applause.)

END 1:56 P.M. EST

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