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Office of the Vice President
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Vice President's Remarks at a Rally for the Troops at Charleston Air Force Base

Charleston Air Force Base
Charleston, South Carolina

2:31 P.M. EST

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thank you all very much. (Applause.) Thank you. And I appreciate the warm welcome, and the chance to visit Charleston Air Force Base in the great state of South Carolina.



Colonel Joerger, I want thank you for yours words and also thank Senator Lindsey Graham, Congressman Henry Brown, and Congressman Joe Wilson, as well as other distinguished guests -- including a number of retired general officers, as well as the First Lady of South Carolina, Jenny Sanford. It's good to be with all of you. I want to thank the "Airmen of Note" for coming down to play for us today. (Applause.) And above all, I want to thank the members of two very fine airlift wings -- the 437th and the 315th. (Applause.)

It's a tremendous honor for us to be here with you today, and your families, as well as to have the chance to award the Bronze Star to three members of the United States Armed Forces. It's a special pleasure to be in your company. And I bring good wishes to each and every one of you from our Commander-in-Chief, President George W. Bush. (Applause.)

These are eventful times for our country, and Team Charleston is at the center of a great many critical assignments. The work you do here -- every day and around the clock -- is helping to sustain the U.S. military in the war on terror. That war goes on; and thanks in part to all of you, it's a war that we're going to win. (Applause.)

Military service, both active and reserve, also makes many demands on spouses and on children. At this base, and in military communities all across the country, servicemen and women and their loved ones are making a lot of sacrifices for the nation. The American people are grateful to all of our military families.

Let me also thank the people of South Carolina. This is a patriotic, generous, and good-hearted part of the country, and a source of tremendous support to all those who serve.

Each time I visit a military installation I come away with renewed confidence in the men and women who wear the uniform of the United States. Each one of you has dedicated yourself to serving our country and its ideals, and you are meeting that commitment in a very challenging hour in American history.

Some challenges have arisen close to home, as we saw along the Gulf Coast, with Hurricane Katrina. Soon after that disaster struck, Air Force crews from Charleston delivered tons of medical gear and humanitarian aid, transported thousands of evacuees, relief workers, and medical patients, and moved the 82nd Airborne into the city of New Orleans. You were swift and skillful in a time of need for our fellow citizens, and I know the people of the Gulf Coast will never forget what you did for them.

You've also carried out humanitarian relief operations in the far corners of the world -- sending supplies to Banda Aceh and the tsunami -- after the tsunami hit in Indonesia; delivering the rescue equipment needed to save a Russian crew trapped underwater last summer; and making the first U.S. air delivery of relief supplies after the Philippine mudslide just last month. For people who suffer in a faraway land, there is no more hopeful sight than a C-17 filled with food, medicine, and supplies from the United States of America.

This nation depends on our military to serve our highest ideals abroad, and to defend America against those who want to do us harm. And our military is repaying that confidence every day. When America was attacked on a terrible September morning four-and-a-half years ago, President Bush said the struggle would be lengthy and difficult, and would require our best effort and unflinching resolve. And in this fight some of the hardest duties have come to those of you in uniform.

Hundreds of men and women from Charleston Air Force Base have been deployed worldwide in the fight against terror -- from medical and air-transport teams, to communication specialists. The jobs we've assigned to this base are larger and more demanding than ever before. And at every point you have been focused, and tireless, and extremely effective. Every day, your C-17s go forth with nearly 300 tons of payload -- everything from communications equipment to Humvee armor. And the bulk of air cargo that goes to the American war fighter begins the journey right here in Charleston.

Missions originating at this base carried out the delivery of millions of rations in food drops over Afghanistan. During the liberation of Afghanistan, you transported Marines, making possible the deepest insertion of an expeditionary force into hostile territory in the history of the Marine Corps.

You have made some of the most massive equipment drops ever attempted, and organized the largest C-17 formation in history. Time and time again, on so many measures of performance, Team Charleston has been absolutely superb. (Applause.) A lot of people are counting on you; you've never let them down. Congratulations on a job well done.

Just before Christmas I had the chance to visit Afghanistan and Iraq, and to meet with some of the forces that we've deployed there. I thanked them for their service, and for all they have done to bring freedom, stability, and peace to a troubled part of the world. Afghanistan a little over four years ago was in the grip of a violent, merciless regime that harbored terrorists and plotted murder for export. There is still tough fighting going on in that country, some of it in very rough terrain, high in the mountains and along border areas. But our people are getting the job done, together with coalition partners and an increasingly strong and professional Afghan military. And Afghanistan is a rising nation -- with a democratically-elected government, a market economy, equality for women, and millions of children going to school for the first time. It is impossible to overstate all that our coalition has achieved in Afghanistan -- and when our forces return home from that part of the world, they can be proud of their service for the rest of their lives.

I brought that same message to our people serving in Iraq. Americans understand what is at stake in that country -- and so do the terrorists. That's why they commit acts of random horror, calculated to shock and intimidate the civilized world. Our enemies also want to provoke sectarian strife, even bombing the Golden Mosque in hopes of starting a civil war. The terrorists know that as freedom takes hold, the ideologies of hatred and resentment will lose their appeal, and the advance of democracy will inspire reformers across the broader Middle East. As that region experiences new hope and progress, we will see the power of freedom to lift up whole nations, and the spread of liberty will produce a much safer world for our children and our grandchildren. The war on terror is a battle for the future of civilization. It is a battle worth fighting. And it is a battle we are going to win. (Applause.)

Our strategy in Iraq is clear, our tactics will remain flexible, and we'll keep at the work until we finish the job. Progress has not come easily, but it has been steady, and we can be confident going forward. By voting in free elections, by ratifying a constitution, by going to the polls with an amazing voter turnout of more than 70 percent, Iraqis have shown they value their own liberty and that they are determined to choose their own destiny.

Our coalition has also put great effort into standing up the Iraqi Security Forces, and we've come a great distance over the past year. We're helping to build an Iraqi force that is well trained and well equipped, and this was vital to the success of the recent elections, and it will be vital to the future peace and security of Iraq. Today the number of Iraqi battalions in the fight has grown to more than 130 -- with over 60 of those battalions taking the lead in their area of operation. And Iraqi forces are conducting more independent operations throughout the country than our coalition forces. Gradually, Iraqi forces are taking control of more and more Iraqi territory. Iraqi units have primary responsibility now for over 30,000 square miles of the country -- roughly 20,000 square miles more than the beginning of the year. And as they undertake further missions on their own, confidence will grow within the country and intelligence tips are coming in, in ever increasing numbers from the Iraqi people.

As Iraqi forces gain strength and experience, and as the political process in Iraq advances, we'll be able to decrease troop levels without losing our capacity to defeat the terrorists. And as always, decisions about troop levels will be driven by the conditions on the ground and the judgment of our commanders -- not by artificial timelines set by politicians in Washington, D.C. (Applause.)

There have been some prominent voices advocating a sudden withdrawal of our forces from Iraq. Some have suggested that this war is not winnable, and a few seem almost eager to conclude that the whole strategy is already lost. But they are wrong. The only way we lose this fight is to quit -- and that's not an option. (Applause.)

Every American serving in this war can be absolutely certain that the people of our country do not support a policy of passivity, of retreat and resignation, and defeatism in the face of terror. The United States will never go back to the false comforts of the world before September 11th, 2001. Terrorist attacks are not caused by the use of strength. They are invited by the perception of weakness. And this nation has made a decision: We will engage these enemies -- facing them far from home, so we do not have to face them on the streets of our own cities. (Applause.)

This work goes on, because we are dealing with enemies who view the entire world as a battlefield. Their prime targets are the United States and the American people.

That effort includes a home front, which is every bit as important as the battlefields abroad. In his speech to Congress after 9/11, President Bush said that the United States would, and I quote, "direct every resource at our command -- every means of diplomacy, every tool of intelligence, every instrument of law enforcement, every financial influence, and every necessary weapon of war -- to the disruption and to the defeat of the global terror network." The Congress backed him up in full, authorizing the President to defeat an enemy that had already slipped into our country, waged a horrific attack against innocent men and women, and doing enormous damage as they killed 3,000 of our fellow citizens.

The President also signed the Patriot Act, which is helping us to disrupt terrorist activity, to break up terror cells within the United States, and to protect the lives of Americans. Another vital step the President took in the days following 9/11 was to authorize the National Security Agency to intercept a certain category of terrorist-linked international communications. There are no communications more important to the safety of the United States than those related to al Qaeda that have one end of their calls in the United States.

If you'll recall, the report of the 9/11 Commission, they focused criticism on our inability to uncover links between terrorists at home and terrorists abroad. The authorization the President made after September 11th helped address that problem in a manner that is fully consistent with the Constitution and with the legal authority of the President and the civil liberties of the American people. The activities conducted under this authorization have helped to detect and prevent possible terrorist attacks against our nation. They are within the President's authority under the Constitution and the laws of the land. And they are vital to the security of our country.

We are talking here about a wartime measure, limited in scope to surveillance associated with terrorists, and conducted in a way that safeguards the civil liberties of the American people. It's important to note that leaders of Congress have been briefed more than a dozen times on this program and the President's authorization, and on activities conducted under it. I have personally presided over most of those briefings. In addition, the entire program is reconsidered and reauthorized by the President approximately every 45 days. He has done so more than 30 times since September 11th -- and he has indicated his intent on continuing to do so as long as our nation faces a continuing threat from al Qaeda.

It seems more than obvious to say that our nation is still at risk. Yet as we get farther away from September 11th, some in Washington are yielding to the temptation to downplay the threat, and to back away from the business at hand. That mindset may be comforting but it is dangerous. We're all grateful this nation has gone for more than four years without another 9/11. Obviously, no one can guarantee that we won't be hit again. But getting through four years of wartime without an attack on the homeland took more than just luck. We've been protected by sensible policy

decisions, by decisive action at home and abroad, and by round-the-clock efforts on the part of people in the armed services, in law enforcement and intelligence, and homeland security. The enemy that struck on 9/11 is weakened and fractured, yet still lethal, still determined to hit us again.

We have faced, and we are facing today, enemies who hate us, who hate our country, and hate the liberties for which we stand. They dwell in the shadows, wear no uniform, have no regard for the laws of warfare, and feel unconstrained by any standards of morality. It's a serious fight -- and we have a lot more to do before it's finished. Either we are serious about fighting this war or we are not. And the enemies of America need to know: We are serious -- and we will not let down our guard. (Applause.)

Ladies and gentlemen, as members of the United States Armed Forces, each one of you is helping to write a proud chapter in the history of freedom. At times you may wonder if your fellow citizens fully realize the extent of your achievements. And I want you to know -- and the President wants you to know -- that Americans do realize it -- and that we do not take our military for granted.

We look with admiration on all of you -- people superbly trained who put the mission first, who work as a team, who put in long hours, and carry out highly technical assignments with excellence. We appreciate fellow citizens who go out on lengthy deployments and endure the hardship of separation from home and family. We care about those who have returned with injuries, and who face a hard road ahead. And our nation grieves for the brave men and women whose lives have ended in freedom's cause. No one can take away the sorrow that comes to the families of the fallen. We can only say, with complete certainty, that these Americans served in a noble and a necessary cause and their sacrifice has made our nation and the world more secure. We will honor their memory forever. (Applause.)

None of us can know every turn that lies ahead for America in the fight against terror. Yet the direction of events is plain to see, and this period of struggle and testing is also a time of promise. The United States of America is a good country, a decent country, and we are making the world a better place by defending the innocent, confronting the violent and bringing freedom to the oppressed. We understand the continuing dangers to civilization, and we have the resources, the strength, and the moral courage to overcome those dangers and to lay the foundations of a better world.

The men and women of Team Charleston are part of that tremendous effort. And again I want to thank each and every one of you for the vital role you play in the defense of our nation. You've been focused and tireless. You carry out your mission with uncompromising standards of quality. And you've built a record of tremendous results across the board. With your spirit of service and integrity, you live up to your motto -- "One family, one mission, one fight."

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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