The President's News Conference
May 24, 2007

The President. Please be seated. Thank you all. Good morning.

Today Congress will vote on legislation that provides our troops with the funds they need. It makes clear that our Iraqi partners must demonstrate progress on security and reconciliation. My administration and Members of Congress from both parties have had many meetings to work out our differences on this legislation. As a result, we've removed the arbitrary timetables for withdrawal and the restrictions on our military commanders that some in Congress had supported.

We were also successful in removing billions of—in unrelated domestic spending that many of the Democrats were insisting on. I wanted to remove even more. But, still, by voting for this bill, members of both parties can show our troops and the Iraqis and the enemy that our country will support our service men and women in harm's way.

As it provides vital funds for our troops, this bill also reflects a consensus that the Iraqi Government needs to show real progress in return for America's continued support and sacrifice. The Iraqi Study Group—the Iraq Study Group recommended that we hold the Iraqi Government to the series of benchmarks for improved security, political reconciliation, and governance that the Iraqis had set for themselves. I agree; so does the Congress. And the bill reflects that recommendation.

These benchmarks provide both the Iraqi Government and the American people with a clear roadmap on the way forward. Meeting these benchmarks will be difficult; it's going to be hard work for this young Government. After all, the Iraqis are recovering from decades of brutal dictatorship. Their democratic Government is just over a year old. And as they're making tough decisions about their future, they're under relentless attack from extremists and radicals who are trying to bring down the young democracy.

Our new strategy is designed to help Iraq's leaders provide security for their people and get control of their capital so they can move forward with reconciliation and reconstruction. Our new strategy is designed to take advantage of new opportunities to partner with local tribes to go after Al Qaida in places like Anbar, which has been the home base of Al Qaida in Iraq.

This summer is going to be a critical time for the new strategy. The last of five reinforcement brigades we are sending to Iraq is scheduled to arrive in Baghdad by mid-June. As these reinforcements carry out their missions, the enemies of a free Iraq, including Al Qaida and illegal militias, will continue to bomb and murder in an attempt to stop us. We're going to expect heavy fighting in the weeks and months. We can expect more American and Iraqi casualties. We must provide our troops with the funds and resources they need to prevail.

Another important issue before Congress is immigration reform. I want to thank the bipartisan group of Senators who produced a bill that will help us secure our borders and reform our immigration system. For decades, the Government failed to stop illegal immigration. My administration has stepped up efforts to improve border security, doubling the number of Border Patrol agents. We've effectively ended the policy of catch-and-release, which allowed some illegal immigrants to be released back into society after they were captured. Last year alone, we apprehended more than a million people trying to enter this country illegally. This is progress, but it's not enough.

Many Americans are rightly skeptical about immigration reform. I strongly believe the bipartisan Senate bill addresses the reasons for past failures, while recognizing the legitimate needs of our economy and upholding the ideals of our immigrant tradition.

This bill does not grant amnesty. Amnesty is forgiveness without a penalty. Instead, this bill requires workers here illegally to acknowledge that they broke the law, pay a fine, pass background checks, remain employed, and maintain a clean record. This bill provides the best chance to reform our immigration system and help us make certain we know who's in our country and where they are.

Our immigration problems cannot be solved piecemeal. They must be all addressed together, and they must be addressed in logical order. So this legislation requires that

border security and worker-verification targets are met before other provisions of the bill are triggered. For example, the temporary-worker program can begin only after these security measures are fully implemented. Immigration reform is a complex issue; it's a difficult piece of legislation. And those who are looking to find fault with this bill will always be able to find something. But if you're serious about securing our borders and bringing millions of illegal immigrants in our country out of the shadows, this bipartisan bill is the best opportunity to move forward. I'm confident, with hard work and good will, Congress can pass and I can sign a bill that fixes an immigration system we all agree is broken.

The issues of war and immigration are difficult, but that's no excuse in avoiding our responsibility to act. The American people sent us to Washington to take on tough problems, and they expect us to deliver results.

And now I'll be glad to answer some of your questions. Hunt [Terence Hunt, Associated Press].

Iran/Nuclear Weapons Nonproliferation Efforts

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. The IAEA says that Iran has significantly accelerated its uranium enrichment program. And today President Ahmadi-nejad said that he would go ahead—he vowed to go ahead. There also is the detention of three Iranian Americans. Where is this all headed? And do you think it's time for tough U.N. sanctions with real teeth, and are you confident that Russia and China would go ahead?

The President. As you know, we have been discussing this issue a lot at these press avails. Iran is constantly on the agenda at a press avail like this—or a press conference like this, and the reason why is, is because they continue to be defiant as to the demands of the free world. The world has spoken and said, no nuclear weapons programs. And yet they're constantly ignoring the demands.

My view is that we need to strengthen our sanction regime. I just spoke to Condoleezza Rice, and we will work with our European partners to develop further sanctions. And, of course, I will discuss this issue with Vladimir Putin as well as President Hu Jintao.

The first thing that these leaders have got to understand is that an Iran with a nuclear weapon would be incredibly destabilizing for the world. It's in their interests that we work collaboratively to continue to isolate that regime.

I'm sympathetic for the people of Iran. I'm sorry they live under a Government that continues to insist upon a program that the world has condemned, because it is denying the good people of Iran economic opportunities that they would have. This is a country with a great tradition and a great history. There are hard-working people in that country that want to benefit from a society that is more open, and yet the Government insists upon measures that will lead to further isolation. And, therefore, to answer one part of your question, we will work with our partners to continue the pressure.

Secondly, obviously, to the extent that these people are picking up innocent Americans, it's unacceptable. And we've made it very clear to the Iranian Government that the detention of good, decent American souls who are there to be beneficial citizens is not acceptable behavior.

Toby [Tabassum Zakaria, Reuters].

U.S. Soldiers Missing in Iraq/War on Terror in Iraq

Q. Mr. President, dozens of American troops have been killed this month, and sectarian violence appears to be rising again in Iraq. And you yourself just said that you're expecting more casualties in the weeks and months ahead. How much longer do you believe you can sustain your current policy in Iraq without significant progress on the ground? And how confident are you about finding those missing soldiers?

The President. I'm confident that the military is doing everything it can to find the missing soldiers. I talked to General Petraeus about this subject and Secretary Gates. And General Petraeus informs him that we're using all the intelligence and all the troops we can find—to find them. It's a top priority of our people there in Iraq.

Obviously, the loss of life is—it is devastating to families. I fully understand that. But I want to remind you as to why I sent more troops in. It was to help stabilize the

capital. You're asking me, "How much longer?" We have yet to even get all our troops in place. General David Petraeus laid out a plan for the Congress. He talked about a strategy all aiming—all aimed at helping this Iraqi Government secure its capital so that they can do the—some of the political work necessary, the hard work necessary to reconcile.

And as I explained in my opening remarks, all the troops won't be there until mid-June. And one reason you're seeing more fighting is because our troops are going into new areas, along with the Iraqis. And so General Petraeus has said, "Why don't you give us until September, and let me report back," to not only me but to the United States Congress, "about progress?"

I would like to see us in a different configuration at some point in time in Iraq. However, it's going to require taking control of the capital. And the best way to do that was to follow the recommendations of General Petraeus. As I have constantly made clear, the recommendations of Baker-Hamilton appeal to me, and that is to be embedded and to train and to guard the territorial integrity of the country and to have Special Forces to chase down Al Qaida. But I didn't think we could get there unless we increased the troop levels to secure the capital. I was fearful that violence would spiral out of control in Iraq and that this experience of trying to help this democracy would—couldn't succeed.

And so therefore, the decisions I made are all aimed at getting us to a different position. And the timing of which will be decided by the commanders on the ground, not politicians here in Washington.

Chen [Ed Chen, Los Angeles Times]. Ed, excuse me. That's Henry [Ed Henry, Cable News Network]. Chen. Now you're coming down there—no, sorry. Work the print people a little bit, see. I've got the strategy—print. Ed, sorry.

Trade With China

Q. Good morning, Mr. President. A lot of lawmakers in Congress are saying that China has not done enough to allow its currency to appreciate, and they're talking about things like duties. What is your view about that, and are you prepared to do more to encourage the appreciation of the yuan?

The President. Thanks, Ed. I spoke to Madam Wu Yi today, as a matter of fact, had her into the Oval Office—wanted to thank her for bringing her delegation in and also to ask her to pass on a message to Hu Jintao that I appreciate his willingness to work in a strategic—with strategic dialogs in order to put in place the type of measures that reflect a complex relationship—in other words, the ability to discuss issues such as beef or intellectual property rights.

And one of the issues that I emphasized to Madam Wu Yi, as well as the delegation, was, was that we're watching very carefully as to whether or not they will appreciate their currency. And that's all in the context of making it clear to China that we value our relationship, but the $233 billion trade deficit must be addressed. And one way to address it is through currency evaluations.

Another way to address it is for them to help convert their economy from one of savers to consumers. And that's why Secretary Paulson worked very assiduously with this strategic dialog group to encourage openness for capital markets; that China must open its capital markets to allow for different financial institutions from around the world to go into the country. It not only will be beneficial to the United States, but we happen to think it will be beneficial to the Chinese economy, for the consumers to have different options when it comes to savings and purchases.

And so this is a important dialog, and it's one that I thank the Chinese Government for engaging in. And there's been some progress. Yesterday they opened new air routes. That's beneficial for U.S. airlines. It also happens to be beneficial for China, as far I am concerned. It's beneficial for that country to open up its access to more travelers, whether they be business or tourists.

Anyway, this is a complex relationship. And there's a lot of areas where we're working together, and there's areas where there's friction. And we've just got to work through the friction. One area where I've been disappointed is beef. They need to be eating U.S. beef. It's good for them. They'll like it. And so we're working hard to get that beef market opened up.

Ed.

War on Terror

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. A new Senate report this morning contends that your administration was warned before the war that by invading Iraq, you would actually give Iran and Al Qaida a golden opportunity to expand their influence, the kind of influence you were talking about with Al Qaida yesterday and with Iran this morning. Why did you ignore those warnings, sir?

The President. Ed, going into Iraq, we were warned about a lot of things, some of which happened, some of which didn't happen. And, obviously, as I made a decision of—as consequential as that, I weighed the risks and rewards of any decision. I firmly believe the world is better off without Saddam Hussein in power. I know the Iraqis are better off without Saddam Hussein in power. I think America is safer without Saddam Hussein in power.

As to Al Qaida in Iraq, Al Qaida is going to fight us wherever we are. See, that's their strategy. Their strategy is to drive us out of the Middle East. They have made it abundantly clear what they want. They want to establish a caliphate. They want to spread their ideology. And they want safe haven from which to launch attacks. They're willing to kill the innocent to achieve their objectives, and they will fight us. And the fundamental question is, will we fight them? I have made the decision to do so. I believe that the best way to protect us in this war on terror is to fight them.

And so we're fighting them in Iraq; we're fighting them in Afghanistan; we've helped the Philippines fight—Philippine Government fight them. We're fighting them. And this notion about how this isn't a war on terror, in my view, is naive. It doesn't reflect the true nature of the world in which we live.

You know, the lessons of September the 11th are these: We've got to stay on the offense; we've got to bring these people to justice before they hurt again; and, at the same time, defeat their ideology with a ideology based upon liberty. And that's what you're seeing, and they're resisting it.

I think it ought to be illustrative to the American people that Al Qaida is trying to stop new democracies from evolving. And what does—what should that tell you? That ought to tell you that we're dealing with people that have an ideology that is opposite of liberty and will take whatever measures are necessary to prevent this young democracy from succeeding.

The danger in this particular theater in the war on terror is that if we were to fail, they'd come and get us. And, you know, I look at these reports right here in the Oval Office. For people who say that we're not under threat, they simply do not know the world. We are under threat. And it's in our interest to pursue this enemy.

Martha [Martha Raddatz, ABC News].

Government of Iraq/U.S. Armed Forces in Iraq

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. You say you want nothing short of victory, that leaving Iraq would be catastrophic. You once again mentioned Al Qaida. Does that mean that you are willing to leave American troops there, no matter what the Iraqi Government does? I know this is a question we've asked before, but you can begin it with a yes or no.

The President. We are there at the invitation of the Iraqi Government. This is a sovereign nation. Twelve million people went to the polls to approve a Constitution. It's their Government's choice. If they were to say, "Leave," we would leave.

Q. [*Inaudible*]—results would be catastrophic, as you've said over and over again?

The President. I would hope that they would recognize that the results would be catastrophic. But this is a sovereign nation, Martha. We are there at their request. And hopefully the Iraqi Government would be wise enough to recognize that without coalition troops, particularly U.S. troops, that they would endanger their very existence. And it's why we work very closely with them, to make sure that the realities are such that they wouldn't make that request. But if they were to make the request, we wouldn't be there.

David [David Gregory, NBC News].

War on Terror/Threat of Further Terrorist Attacks

Q. Mr. President, after the mistakes that have been made in this war, when you do as you did yesterday, where you raised 2-year-old intelligence, talking about the threat posed by Al Qaida, it's met with increasing skepticism. The majority in the public, a growing number of Republicans appear not to trust you any longer to be able to carry out this policy successfully. Can you explain why you believe you're still a credible messenger on the war?

The President. I'm credible because I read the intelligence, David, and make it abundantly clear in plain terms that if we let up, we'll be attacked. And I firmly believe that.

Look, this has been a long, difficult experience for the American people. I can assure you, Al Qaida, who would like to attack us again, have got plenty of patience and persistence. And the question is, will we?

Yes, I talked about intelligence yesterday. I wanted to make sure the intelligence I laid out was credible, so we took our time. Somebody said, well, he's trying to politicize the thing. If I was trying to politicize it, I'd have dropped it out before the 2006 elections. I believe I have an obligation to tell the truth to the American people as to the nature of the enemy. And it's unpleasant for some. I fully recognize that after 9/11, in the calm here at home, relatively speaking, caused some to say, well, maybe we're not at war. I know that's a comfortable position to be in, but that's not the truth.

Failure in Iraq will cause generations to suffer, in my judgment. Al Qaida will be emboldened. They will say, yes, once again, we've driven the great, soft America out of a part of the region. It will cause them to be able to recruit more. It will give them safe haven. They are a direct threat to the United States.

And I'm going to keep talking about it. That's my job as the President, is to tell people the threats we face and what we're doing about it. And what we've done about it is, we've strengthened our homeland defenses. We've got new techniques that we use that enable us to better determine their motives and their plans and plots. We're working with nations around the world to deal with these radicals and extremists. But they're dangerous, and I can't put it any more plainly—they're dangerous. And we will—and I can't put it any more plainly to the American people and to them—we will stay on the offense.

It's better to fight them there than here. And this concept about, well, maybe let us kind of just leave them alone, and maybe they'll be all right is naive. These people attacked us before we were in Iraq. They viciously attacked us before we were in Iraq, and they've been attacking ever since. They are a threat to your children, David, and whoever is in that Oval Office better understand it and take measures necessary to protect the American people.

Q. So what about—[*inaudible*].

The President. Axelrod [Jim Axelrod, CBS News].

U.S. Armed Forces in Iraq

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. I'd like to ask you about the Petraeus report, which, as you say, will be in September and report on progress. Doesn't setting up the September date give the enemy exactly what you've said you don't want them to have, which is a date to focus on, and doesn't it guarantee a bloody August?

And while I have you, sir, the phrase you just used, "a different configuration in Iraq" that you'd like to see, is that a plan B?

The President. Well, see, actually, I would call that a plan recommended by Baker-Hamilton, so that would be a plan BH. I've stated—you didn't like it? [*Laughter*] Okay.

I've stated, this is an idea that—I like the concept. The question is, could we get there given the violence last fall? And the answer, in my judgment, was, no, we would never be able to configure our troops that way, in that configuration—place our troops in that configuration given the violence inside the capital city.

David Petraeus felt like that it was important to tell the White House and tell the Congress that he would come back with an assessment in September. It's his decision to give the assessment, and I respect him, and I support him.

Q. Doesn't it give the terrorists a——

The President. It does; precisely. It's going to make—it could make August a tough month, because you see, what they're going to try to do is kill as many innocent people as they can to try to influence the debate here at home. Don't you find that interesting? I do—that they recognize that the death of innocent people could shake our will, could undermine David Petraeus's attempt to create a more stable Government. They will do anything they can to prevent success. And the reason why is, Al Qaida fully understands that if we retreat, they then are able to have another safe haven, in their mind.

Yesterday, in my speech, I quoted quotes from Usama bin Laden. And the reason I did was—is that I want the American people to hear what he has to say—not what I say, what he says. And in my judgment, we ought to be taking the words of the enemy seriously.

And so, yes, it could be a bloody—it could be a very difficult August. And I fully understand——

Q. [*Inaudible*]—fighting the Democrats on that in the Senate about a date——

The President. Yes, David Petraeus, the commander—look, do you want politicians making those decisions, or do you want commanders on the ground making the decisions? My point is, is that I would trust David Petraeus to make an assessment and a recommendation a lot better than people in the United States Congress. And that's precisely the difference.

Michael [Michael Abramowitz, Washington Post].

Justice Department/Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales

Q. Good morning, Mr. President. I'd like to ask you about the Justice Department. In the last couple months, we have heard disturbing evidence about senior officials of the Justice Department misleading Congress. We heard disturbing evidence yesterday that a senior official at Justice Department improperly took, by her own admission, political considerations into effect in evaluating career employees of the Justice Department.

We've also had evidence from the former Deputy Attorney General of the White House strong-arming a sick man into trying to approve an illegal spying program. I'm curious, Mr. President, if you are concerned about the cumulative picture that's being drawn about your Justice Department? And what assurances can you give the American people that the Department is delivering impartial justice to the American people?

The President. Yes, thank you, Michael. There is a—an internal investigation taking place at the Justice Department. And this will be an exhaustive investigation. And if there's wrongdoing, it will be taken care of.

I thought it was interesting how you started your question, "over the months." I think you said, "over the last months." This investigation is taking a long time, kind of being drug out. I suspect for political question—for political reasons. In other words, as I mentioned the other day, it's just grand political theater.

Attorney General Gonzales has testified. He's produced documents. And I would hope the Senate and the Congress would move expeditiously to finish their hearings and get on to the business of passing legislation that is meaningful for the country. But if there had been wrongdoing, that will be addressed, the way we'd hope it would be.

Q. [*Inaudible*]—confidence. Are you——

The President. Yes, I've got confidence in Al Gonzales doing the job. Bret [Bret Baier, FOX News].

War on Terror/Progress in Iraq

Q. Mr. President, are you surprised by reports today from the Iraqis that sectarian killings are actually on the rise to pre-troop-surge levels? And, if I may, yesterday after your speech, Senator Joe Biden said Al Qaida in Iraq is a "Bush-fulfilling prophecy." They weren't there before; now they're there. He said U.S. troops should get out of the middle of a civil war and fight Al Qaida. Can you respond to that?

The President. We are fighting Al Qaida in Iraq. A lot of the spectaculars you're seeing are caused by Al Qaida. Al Qaida will fight us wherever we are. That's what they do. That's what they've said they want to do. They have objectives. These are ideologues driven by a vision of the world that we must defeat. And you defeat them on the one hand

by hunting them down and bringing them to justice, and you defeat them on the other hand by offering a different alternative form of government.

The Middle East looked nice and cozy for a while. Everything looked fine on the surface, but beneath the surface, there was a lot of resentment, there was a lot of frustration, such that 19 kids got on airplanes and killed 3,000 Americans. It's in the long-term interest of this country to address the root causes of these extremists and radicals exploiting people that cause them to kill themselves and kill Americans and others.

I happen to believe one way to do that is to address the forms of government under which people live. Democracy is really difficult work, but democracy has proven to help change parts of the world from cauldrons of frustration to areas of hope. And we will continue to pursue this form of policy; it's in our national interest we do so.

What other aspect of the question?

Q. [*Inaudible*]

The President. Yes, I'm—there's—certainly, there's been an uptick in violence. It's a snapshot; it's a moment. And David Petraeus will come back with his assessment, after his plan has been fully implemented, and give us a report as to what he recommends—what he sees, and what he recommends, which is, I think, a lot more credible than what Members of Congress recommend. We want our commanders making the recommendations, and—along with Ryan Crocker, our Ambassador there—I don't want to leave Ryan out.

And so it's a—you know, to Axelrod's point, it's a—no question it's the kind of report that the enemy would like to affect because they want us to leave. They want us out of there. And the reason they want us to leave is because they have objectives that they want to accomplish. Al Qaida—David Petraeus called Al Qaida public enemy number one in Iraq. I agree with him. And Al Qaida is public enemy number one in America. It seems like to me that if they're public enemy number one here, we want to help defeat them in Iraq.

This is a tough fight, you know? And it's, obviously, it's had an effect on the American people. Americans—a lot of Americans want to know win—when are you going to win? Victory is—victory will come when that country is stable enough to be able to be an ally in the war on terror and to govern itself and defend itself.

One of the things that appealed to me about the Baker-Hamilton is that it will provide a—kind of a long-term basis for that likely to happen, assuming the Iraqi Government invites us to stay there. I believe this is an area where we can find common ground with Democrats and Republicans, by the way. I fully recognize there are a group of Democrats who say, "Get out of the deal now. It's just not worth it."

One of the areas where I really believe we need more of a national discussion, however, is, what would be the consequences of failure in Iraq? See, people have got to understand that if that government were to fall, the people would tend to divide into kind of sectarian enclaves, much more so than today, that would invite Iranian influence and would invite Al Qaida influence, much more so than in Iraq today. That would then create enormous turmoil—or could end up creating enormous turmoil in the Middle East, which would have a direct effect on the security of the United States.

Failure in Iraq affects the security of this country. It's hard for some Americans to see that—I fully understand it. I see it clearly. I believe this is the great challenge of the beginning of the 21st century—not just Iraq, but dealing with this radical, ideological movement in a way that secures us in the short term and more likely secures us in the long term.

Jim [Jim Rutenberg, New York Times]. You didn't nod off there, did you? [*Laughter*] A little hot out here in the Rose Garden for you? [*Laughter*]

Usama bin Laden/Threat of Further Terrorist Attacks

Q. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. Yes, well, go ahead and take the tie off. I'm halfway done anyway. [*Laughter*]

Q. Mr. President, yesterday you discussed Usama bin Laden's plans to turn Iraq into a terrorist sanctuary. What do you think your own reaction would have been 5 years ago

had you been told that towards the end of your term, he would still be at large with that kind of capability, from Iraq, no less, and why—can you tell the American people—is he still on the run? Why is he so hard to catch?

The President. I would say that 5 years ago, like I said, we're going to pursue him, and we are pursuing him. And he's hiding. He is in a remote region of the world. If I knew precisely where he is, we would take the appropriate action to bring him to justice. He is attempting to establish a base of operations in Iraq. He hasn't established a base in operations. My points yesterday were, here was his intentions, but thankfully, of the three people I named, all of them no longer are a part of his operation.

My point is, is that—I was making the point, Jim, as I'm sure you recognized, that if we leave, they follow us. And my point was, was that Usama bin Laden was establishing an external cell there, or trying to. And he's been unable to do it—precisely my point. That's why we've got to stay engaged. Had he been able to establish an internal cell that had safe haven, we would be a lot more in danger today than we are. His organization is a risk. We will continue to pursue as hard as we possibly can. We will do everything we can to bring him and others to justice.

We have had good success in the chief operating officer position of Al Qaida. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Ramzi al Rabium—there's a lot of names, some of whom I mentioned yesterday, that are no longer a threat to the United States. We will continue to work to bring him to justice—that's exactly what the American people expect us to do—and in the meantime, use the tools we put in place to protect this homeland.

We are under threat. Some may say, well, he's just saying that to get people to pay attention to him, or try to scare them into—for some reason. I would hope our world hadn't become so cynical that they don't take the threats of Al Qaida seriously, because they're real. And it's a danger to the American people. It's a danger to your children, Jim. And it's really important that we do all we can do to bring them to justice.

Q. Mr. President, why is he still at large?

The President. Why is he at large? Because we haven't got him yet, Jim. That's why. And he's hiding, and we're looking, and we will continue to look until we bring him to justice. We've brought a lot of his buddies to justice, but not him. That's why he's still at large. He's not out there traipsing around. He's not leading many parades, however. He's not out feeding the hungry. He's isolated, trying to kill people to achieve his objective.

Those are his words—his objectives are his words, not mine. He has made it clear—he and Zawahiri, their number two, have made it clear what they want. And in a war against extremists and radicals like these, we ought to be listening carefully to what they say. We ought to take their words seriously. There have been moments in history where others haven't taken the words of people seriously, and they suffered. So, I'm taking them seriously.

Yes, Jim [Jim Gerstenzang, Los Angeles Times].

Former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq

Q. Mr. President, moments ago you said that Al Qaida attacked us before we were in Iraq. Since then Iraq has become much less stable; Al Qaida has used it as a recruiting tool, apparently with some success. So what would you say to those who would argue that what we've done in Iraq has simply enhanced Al Qaida and made the situation worse?

The President. Oh, so, in other words, the option would have been just let Saddam Hussein stay there? Your question is, should we not have left Saddam Hussein in power? And the answer is, absolutely not. Saddam Hussein was an enemy of the United States. He'd attacked his neighbors. He was paying Palestinian suicide bombers. He would have been—if he were to defy—and by the way, cheating on the U.N. oil for sanctions program—Oil-for-Food Programme. No, I don't buy it. I don't buy that this world would be a better place with Saddam Hussein in power, and particularly if—and I'm sure the Iraqis would agree with that.

See, that's the kind of attitude—he says, okay, let's let them live under a tyrant, and

I just don't agree. I obviously thought he had weapons; he didn't have weapons; the world thought he had weapons. It was a surprise to me that he didn't have the weapons of mass destruction everybody thought he had, but he had the capacity at some point in time to make weapons. It would have been a really dangerous world if we had the Iranians trying to develop a nuclear weapon, and Saddam Hussein competing for a nuclear weapon. You can imagine what the mentality of the Middle East would have been like.

So the heart of your question is, shouldn't you have left Saddam Hussein in power? And the answer is, no. And now that we've——

Q. [*Inaudible*]

The President. ——well, that's really the crux of it. And—let me finish, please, here. I'm on a roll here. And so now that we have, does it make sense to help this young democracy survive? And the answer is, yes, for a variety of reasons.

One, we want to make sure that this enemy that did attack us doesn't establish a safe haven from which to attack again. Two, the ultimate success in a war against ideologues is to offer a different ideology, one based upon liberty—by the way, embraced by 12 million people when given the chance. Thirdly, our credibility is at stake in the Middle East. There's a lot of Middle Eastern nations wondering whether the United States of America is willing to push back against radicals and extremists, no matter what their religion base—religious bases may be.

And so the stakes are high in Iraq. I believe they're absolutely necessary for the security of this country. The consequences of failure are immense.

Yes.

Q. So there was no choice—so there was no choice between the course we took and leaving Saddam Hussein in power? Nothing else that might have worked?

The President. Well, we tried other things. As you might remember back then, we tried the diplomatic route: 1441 was a unanimous vote in the Security Council that said disclose, disarm, or face serious consequences. So, the choice was his to make. And he made—he made a choice that has subsequently left—subsequently caused him to lose his life under a system that he wouldn't have given his own citizens. We tried diplomacy. As a matter of fact, not only did I try diplomacy; other Presidents tried diplomacy.

Let's see here. John [John McKinnon, Wall Street Journal].

Legislative Priorities/Immigration Reform

Q. Thanks, Mr. President. You've said many times that you plan to sprint to the finish of your Presidency. At this point in the home stretch, what can you say you're still expecting to accomplish? And how concerned are you that the immigration bill in particular is going to get caught up in electoral politics?

The President. Yes, thanks. Well, we need to pass additional energy legislation. We need to renew No Child Left Behind. Get these trade bills out of Congress—the trade bills on Panama and Peru and Colombia, hopefully work toward a free trade—further the work we've done on the Korean free trade agreement. Hopefully I'll be able to bring back successful negotiations on Doha for a congressional vote which will require a TPA extension and/or—a TPA extension, there's no "and/or" to it. Making sure that this progress on balancing the budget continues. The deficit is—I know you're following the numbers, John—the deficit is reduced more than anticipated as a result of increased tax revenues coming in and the fiscal measures that we took. And now we're going to have to work with Congress to make sure they don't overspend and make sure they don't raise the taxes on the people as well.

Running up the taxes will hurt this economy, which would hurt the revenues to the Treasury. I'm deeply concerned about the Democratic budget that is classic tax and spend. I'm looking forward to seeing how they intend to keep their promise of balancing this budget in 5 years.

A big—and of course, fighting this war on terror is a huge issue. I obviously would like to find common ground on how to proceed in Iraq, with Democrats and Republicans. I recognize there are a handful there or some who just say, "Get out; it's just not worth it; let's just leave." I strongly disagree with

that attitude. Most Americans do as well. And the vote showed that what's possible when we work together, the vote—the pending vote today showed what's possible when we work together, when Republicans and Democrats work together. There's a good group of Republicans that want to work with Democrats. They just don't want to accept something that they don't agree with.

Immigration—this is a tough issue. This is a very emotional, hard issue for members of both parties. I've always been a believer that comprehensive immigration reform is the best way to secure our border. I campaigned on that for President twice. I believed it when I was the Governor of Texas. I understand this issue very well. I also understand the frustrations of many citizens in that they believe the government hasn't done its job of stopping illegal migrants from coming into the country.

And that's why over the past couple of years there's been a significant effort to secure the border. There's going to be a doubling of the Border Patrol agents; there's going to be fencing and berms and different types of equipment to help the Border Patrol do its job in a better way. As a matter of fact, I was concerned about it enough to ask the National Guard to go down there for a while.

But, John, I don't see—and so those concerns, by the way, are addressed in this bill. The bill essentially says that before any other reforms take place, certain benchmarks will be met when it comes to securing the border. Last year, during the debate, people said, well, let's have security first. That's exactly what the bill does.

However, I don't see how you can have the border security the American people expect unless you have a temporary-worker program, with a verifiable work card. People will come here to do work to feed their families, and they'll figure out ways to do so. As a result of people wanting to come here to do work to feed their families, there is an underground industry that has sprung up that I think is essentially anti-humanitarian. It is an industry based upon *coyotes*—those are smugglers. Good, hard-working, decent people pay pretty good size money to be smuggled into the United States of America.

There is a document forgery industry in America. There are people who are willing to stuff people inside temporary shelter in order for them to evade the law. I don't think this is American. I think the whole industry that exploits the human being is not in our Nation's interests. And the best way to deal with this problem is to say, if you're going to come and do jobs Americans aren't doing, here is a opportunity to do so, on a temporary basis. I would much rather have people crossing the border with a legitimate card, coming to work on a temporary basis, than being stuffed in the back of an 18-wheeler. And I would hope most Americans feel that as well.

Secondly, in order for there to be good employer verification—it's against the law to hire somebody who is here illegally, but many times small businesses or large are presented with documents, and they don't know whether they're real or not. And so, therefore, we must have a tamper-proof identification card, which is a part of this bill.

A tough issue, of course, is what do you do with the people already here? Anything short of kicking them out, as far as some people are concerned, is called amnesty. You can't kick them out. Anybody who advocates trying to dig out 12 million people who have been in our society for a while is sending a signal to the American people that's just not real. It's an impractical solution. Nor do I think they ought to be given automatic citizenship; that is amnesty: Okay, you're here illegally; therefore you're automatically a citizen.

And so, therefore, we proposed and worked with the Senate to devise a plan that said, if you're here already before a certain date, that there are certain hurdles you must cross in order to receive what's called a Z visa, in order to be able to work here. You've got to go through a background check; you've got to pay a fine at some point in time; there's a probationary period. And there's a series of steps that people have to go through, and then people get at the back of the line, the citizenship line, not the beginning of the citizenship line.

If you're for the bill, I thank you. If you're against it, you can find every reason in the world to be against a comprehensive bill. It's

easy to find something to be against in this bill. All it takes is to take one little aspect of it and ignore the comprehensive nature and how good it is.

I knew this was going to be an explosive issue. It's easy to hold up somebody who is here and working hard as a political target. I would like to get this bill done for a lot of reasons. I'd like to get it done because it's the right thing to do. I'd like to get it done because I happen to believe the approach that is now being discussed in the Senate is an approach that will actually solve the problem. I'd like to get it out of politics. I don't think it's good to be, you know, holding people up. We've been through immigration debates in this country, and they can bring out the worst, sometimes, in people. We're a land of immigrants.

I was touched yesterday when the kid from the Coast Guard Academy, ensign, now ensign talked about his migrant grandfather from Mexico. And here's this guy, this man standing up in front of the President of the United States and his class, talking about serving America. He wasn't—you know, his grandfather wasn't born here. I don't know what job he did; I suspect it was probably manual labor. I don't know; I didn't ask him.

But I do know he spoke with pride. I do know he represents the best about what immigration can mean for America. You know, welcoming people here who want to work and realize the American Dream renews our spirit and soul. It's been the case throughout generations. And we have an opportunity to put a good law in place now—right now. And it's going to be hard work. And sure, politics will get involved. But the question is, will Members of Congress rise above politics? I will. It's the right thing to have a comprehensive bill.

And so I'm going to continue to reach out to Members of Congress from both parties and call upon them to take the lead and show the political courage necessary to get the bill to my desk as quickly as possible.

I want to thank you for your interest.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 11:01 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Vladimir Putin of Russia; President Hu Jintao and Vice Premier Wu Yi of China; Gen. David Petraeus, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq; Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates; James A. Baker III and Lee H. Hamilton, cochairs, Iraq Study Group; and Usama bin Laden, leader of the Al Qaida terrorist organization. Reporters referred to former Department of Justice official Monica M. Goodling; former Deputy Attorney General James B. Comey; and former Attorney General John Ashcroft.

Statement on the Nomination of James W. Holsinger, Jr., To Be Surgeon General

May 24, 2007

Today I have announced my intention to nominate James W. Holsinger, Jr., to serve as the 18th Surgeon General of the United States. Dr. Holsinger is an accomplished physician who has led one of our Nation's largest health care systems, the State of Kentucky's health care system, and the University of Kentucky's Medical Center. He also has taught at several American medical schools, and he served more than three decades in the United States Army Reserve, retiring in 1993 as a Major General.

As America's chief health educator, he will be charged with providing the best scientific information available on how Americans can make smart choices that improve their health and reduce their risk of illness and injury. Dr. Holsinger will particularly focus his efforts on educating parents and children about childhood obesity, a serious epidemic that decreases quality of life and burdens our health care system. I am confident that Dr. Holsinger will help our Nation confront this challenge and many others to ensure that Americans live longer, better, and healthier lives.

Remarks Following a Visit With Wounded Troops and Their Families at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland

May 25, 2007

First, I applaud the bipartisan effort to get a emergency supplemental bill to my desk. The Speaker and the leader said they would