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Remarks Prior to a Meeting With Secretary of State Colin Powell and an Exchange With Reporters
April 18, 2002

Situation in the Middle East

The President. I'm pleased to welcome the Secretary of State back to the Oval Office. Presidents and Secretaries of State have sat here for a long time, trying to figure out how to reduce violence and bring peace to the Middle East. The Secretary went over with a vision on how to do that.

We talked about the two states living at peace with each other. He carried that message of hope and peace, that our Nation is—will work hard to achieve a peace. He also carried the message that people must—must be focused and must work hard to achieve a peace. People in the region have got certain responsibilities.

The short-term responsibilities are these: The Palestinian Authority must act on its condemnation of terror; the Israelis are withdrawing from Jenin and Nabulus, and they must continue their withdrawals; and neighbors in the region must condemn terror, cut off funding for terror, must make it clear that people who suicide bomb are not martyrs, that they kill or are murderers of innocent people.

As well, the Secretary's trip made it clear that our Nation thinks beyond the shortterm, that we're serious when we talk about two states living side by side and that we're laying the foundations for peace, the structures necessary to get to peace. Progress is being made toward our vision. In order for that vision to be achieved, leaders must take responsibility; leaders in the region must be responsible citizens for a peaceful world.

The Secretary delivered that message loud and clear, and I want to thank him for his work.

Mr. Secretary.

Secretary Powell. Thank you, Mr. President. I did try to deliver that message loud and clear that the United States does have a vision, a vision that leads to two states living in peace, side by side—the only solution to this conflict. And I talked about what the sides have to do with respect to restoring a sense of security so the two peoples and—have confidence in one another and begin negotiations once again, essentially put down security element to our strategy. We made clear to the leaders in the region that we want to move forward with negotiations as early as possible, and we're looking at different ways to do that once security has been established—link the negotiations closely to security.

And the third part of our framework was the humanitarian part. There would be a great need for humanitarian relief, for reconstruction efforts, and all that has to be part of an integrated strategy.

And we can begin working quickly on that integrated strategy if the Palestinian Authority, if Chairman Arafat and those Palestinian leaders not only denounce violence, but take action to act against those who continue to encourage violence and perform acts of terrorism and violence. The terrorism, violence has to stop. I made that message very clear.

I'm pleased that the Israeli Government is now continuing withdrawal. I hope it will be accelerated, and we will bring that to an end as quickly as possible, because that is one of the difficulties that we have now in moving forward in the integrated strategy.

And Mr. President, we will be staying in close touch with the situation, by phone and with various members of the administration who are already in the region, such as Ambassador Bill Burns, and with the assets of the Department of State and other departments of Government to make sure that the strategy is understood and shared

with our friends around the world who are ready to execute it.

The President. Terry [Terry Moran, ABC News].

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel/Jenin

Q. Mr. President, you said progress has been made toward our vision. Where? And secondly, do you believe that Ariel Sharon is a man of peace, and are you satisfied with his and his Government's assurances that there was no massacre in Jenin?

The President. I do believe Ariel Sharon is a man of peace. I think he wants—I'm confident he wants Israel to be able to exist at peace with its neighbor—with its neighbors. I mean, he's told that us here in the Oval Office. He has embraced the notion of two states living side by side.

And a progress is made, Terry, as a result of the United States and the Secretary of State going to the region and convincing the parties that we'll never get to peace if there's violence. And the situation prior to the Secretary's arrival was at a boiling point, and thanks to his hard work, he has laid out not only a vision of hope, which is important, but has convinced others that these terrorist acts will forever and constantly undermine the capacity for peace.

As he mentioned and I mentioned, there have been withdrawals from the West Bank. Mr. Arafat did condemn terror, and we will hold him to account.

This is a part of the world where killing had been going on for a long, long time. And one trip by the Secretary of State is not going to prevent that from happening, but one trip by the Secretary of State laid out the framework and the path to achieve peace. The United States has an obligation to do just that, and he did. And I have done that, and we will continue to do that.

Q. And Jenin?

The President. I was told by the Prime Minister last—a couple of days ago that they were withdrawing from Jenin, and I believe they will—oh, the—we'll see what the evidence says.

Future Involvement in the Middle East

Q. Mr. President, you said yesterday that you plan to stay engaged in the Middle East. What is the next step? Do you send Mr. Tenet to the region? And specifically, do you support an international peace conference?

The President. Well, let's make sure everybody understands that we have been engaged from the beginning of this administration. It's a—the Mitchell plan came into being as a result of the mission that President Clinton called together. But as a—the Secretary of State and myself and the administration embraced the Mitchell plan. It is a way to achieve peace. All parties signed on to it. We worked to get them to sign on to it.

The Tenet plan, as a result of this administration sending George Tenet to the region to lay out a security cooperation agreement—and so when you—not reading into your question, I just want to make it clear that the history of this administration shows that the Middle East is an incredibly important part of our foreign policy.

I went to the United Nations, spoke clearly about two nations living side by side. And so not only have we been, as they say, engaged—of course, we will be engaged. It is essential that we continue to work to fight terror. There will never be peace in parts of the world unless we're willing to rout out terror.

And as I said in my speech yesterday, that this war against terror is a part of making sure the world is not only safer but, eventually and as importantly, better. And as the Secretary said, that there must be a humanitarian aspect to peace in the Middle East, that people must have hope, that the hope doesn't come from killing; the hope comes from an ability to realize what all of us want, which is to raise our children in a peaceful and secure environment, hope they get educated, and people can realize their entrepreneurial dreams.

And that is exactly where our vision is. And that's why we will be engaged not only there but around the world where we fight terror. This is the calling of our time, to fight terror. And this Government will be strong in our battle against terror.

Patsy [Patricia Wilson, Reuters].

Israeli Withdrawal From Palestinian Territories

Q. Mr. President, does it trouble you that Israel hasn't withdrawn without delay, as you requested? And does the demand still stand for a full and immediate withdrawal?

The President. Well, Israel started withdrawing quickly, after our call, from smaller cities on the West Bank. History will show that they responded. And as the Prime Minister said, told me—he gave me a timetable, and he's met the timetable.

In Ramallah, there is an issue with the "Zeevi five" killers. They're housed in the basement where Colin visited with Mr. Arafat, and we will work with the Israelis to figure out a solution to the "Zeevi five." These people are accused of killing a Cabinet official of the Israeli Government. And I can understand why the Prime Minister wants them brought to justice. They should be brought to justice if they killed this man in cold blood.

And so I can—the situation in Ramallah is based upon that particular part of the problem. In terms of the Church of the Nativity, hopefully progress is being made. Once the people are out of the Church of the Nativity, Israel will leave—pull back out of Bethlehem. This is good progress. I'm convinced that the Secretary of State's trip helped achieve this progress.

Listen, thank you all.

Q. Mr. President, can I ask one question on the Middle East?

The President. You had your shot.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:54 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority; and Israeli Tourism Minister Rehavam Zeevi, who was killed October 7, 2002. The Secretary of State referred to U.S. Ambassador to Jordan and Amman William J. Burns. The President also referred to the Tenet plan, the Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire and security plan of June 13, 2001, negotiated by Director of Central Intelligence George J. Tenet; and the Mitchell report, the Report of the Sharm el-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee, issued April 30, 2001. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.

Remarks on Reauthorization of Welfare Reform Legislation
April 18, 2002

The President. Thank you very much, Tommy. I want to thank you all for coming, and welcome to the people's house. Today we're here to talk about the inspiring commitment and persistence of Americans who left welfare for better lives. And we're here to talk about the compassion of American companies which hired them. And we're here to talk about the next actions we must take in welfare reform to encourage work and to encourage families.

I want to thank Tommy for his leadership at the Department of Health and Human Services. I knew he was going to be a good one, because I saw what he did as Governor of Wisconsin, and he brought that very same skills of leadership and vision to Washington.