

Remarks to the Travel Pool and an Exchange With Reporters in Charlotte April 5, 2004

Visit With Family of U.S. Soldier Killed in Iraq

The President. I just met with Specialist Chris Hill's family from North Carolina. You know, I told the family how much we appreciated his sacrifice—he was killed in Iraq—and assured him that we would stay the course, that a free Iraq was very important for peace in the world, long-term peace, and that we're being challenged in Iraq because there are people there that hate freedom. But the family was pleased to hear that we would—that its son would not have died in vain. And that's an important message that I wanted to share with you today.

Let me ask you a couple of questions. Who is the AP person?

Q. I am.

The President. You are? Well, ask it.

Q. Sir, in regard to—

The President. Who are you talking to?

Deadline for Transfer of Iraqi Sovereignty/ Situation in Iraq

Q. Mr. President, in regard to the June 30th deadline, is there a chance that that would be moved back?

The President. No, the intention is to make sure the deadline remains the same. I believe we can transfer authority by June 30th. We're working toward that date. We're obviously constantly in touch with Jerry Bremer on the transfer of sovereignty. The United Nations is over there now—the United Nations representative is there now to work on the—on a—on to whom we transfer sovereignty. I mean, in other words, it's one thing to decide to transfer. We're now in the process of deciding what the entity will look like to whom we will transfer sovereignty. But no, the date remains firm.

Stretch [Richard Keil, Bloomberg News].

Q. Mr. President, are you concerned at all that events like we've seen over the last week in Iraq are going to make it tougher to meet that deadline or increase pressure from the U.N. or anyone else?

The President. Well, I think there's—my judgment is, is that the closer we come to the deadline, the more likely it is people will challenge our will. In other words, it provides a convenient excuse to attack. In this particular incident, with Sadr, this is one person who is deciding that rather than allow democracy to flourish, he's going to exercise force. And we just can't let it stand. As I understand, the CPA today announced a warrant for his arrest. This is one person—this is a person, and followers, who are trying to say, "We don't want democracy. As a matter of fact, we'll decide the course of democracy by the use of force." And that is the opposite of democracy. And it's—that's why the CPA issued the statement they issued.

But Stretch, I think throughout this period there's going to be tests. We were tested in Fallujah. And the desire for those who do not want there to be a free and democratic Iraq is to shake our will through acts of violence and terror. It's not only our will; it's the will of other coalition forces, and it's the will of the Iraqi people. As you know, that many Iraqis have been targeted. As a matter of fact, the Al Qaida affiliate Zarqawi made it clear that part of the strategy was to turn Shi'a on Sunni by killing innocent Iraqis.

And we've got to stay the course, and we will stay the course. The message to the Iraqi citizens is, they don't have to fear that America will turn and run. And that's an important message for them to hear. If they think that we're not sincere about staying the course, many people will not continue to take a risk toward—take the risk toward freedom and democracy.

Yes, Tamara [Tamara Lipper, Newsweek].

Selection of U.S. Ambassador to Iraq

Q. Mr. President, can you tell us a little bit about your decisionmaking for the next ambassador to Iraq, and what you're looking for in the person who would represent the administration?

The President. Good question. I am looking for somebody who can run a big embassy, somebody who understands the relationship between an embassy and the military. Because one of the things that's going to be very important for the next ambassador to Iraq—this will be the person that takes Jerry Bremer's place—will be the willingness and capability of working with a very strong—a country in which there's a very strong U.S. military presence as well as a coalition presence. This person is going to need to have enough experience to basically start an embassy from the ground up and also be willing to transfer certain people and authorities from the CPA to the embassy itself. In other words, it's a very complex task that's going to require a skilled soul. And we're in the process of searching it out now.

President's Upcoming Meeting With the 9/11 Commission

Q. Mr. President, can you just tell me—the 9/11 Commission, the Chairman yesterday, Governor Kean, said a date had been set, I think, for your testimony and the Vice President's. Is that—

The President. I would call it a meeting.

Q. A meeting, I'm sorry.

The President. Thank you.

Q. Has that date been set, and could you share it with us? And number two, can you tell us the rationale as to why you have chosen to testify or rather meet with them with the Vice President?

The President. First of all, it will be a great opportunity from them to ask both of us our opinions on the subject. And we're meeting with the entire Commission.

I'm not exactly sure what the status is of putting out the date. I told them I'd meet with them at a time that's convenient for all of us, and hopefully we'll come to that date soon. I look forward to sharing information with them. Let me just be very clear about this: Had we had the information that was necessary to stop an attack, I'd have stopped the attack. And I'm convinced any other government would have too. I mean, make no mistake about it, if we'd have known that the enemy was going to fly airplanes into our buildings, we'd have done everything in our power to stop it. And what is important for them to hear not only is that, but that when I realized that the stakes had changed, that this country immediately went on war footing, and we went to war against Al Qaida. It took me very little time to make up my mind, once I determined Al Qaida to do it, to say we're going to go get them. And we have, and we're going to keep after them until they're brought to justice and America is secure.

But I'm looking forward to the conversation. I'm looking forward to Condi testifying. I made a decision to allow her to do so because I was assured that it would not jeopardize executive privilege. And she'll be great. She's a very smart, capable person who knows exactly what took place and will lay out the facts. And that's what the Commission's job is meant to do, and that's what the American people want to see. I'm looking forward to people hearing her.

All right, got to go to work. Thanks. Good to see you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:31 a.m. at Central Piedmont Community College-Central Campus. In his remarks, he referred to L. Paul "Jerry" Bremer III, Presidential Envoy to Iraq; Iraqi Shiite cleric Muqtada Al Sadr; senior Al Qaida associate Abu Musab Al Zarqawi; and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice. A reporter referred to Thomas H. Kean, Chairman, National

Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (9/11 Commission).

Remarks at a Bush-Cheney Luncheon in Charlotte April 5, 2004

Thank you all. Thank you all very much. Thanks for coming. Thank you all. Thanks for the warm welcome. Last time I was supposed to be here, it wasn't going to be so warm. [Laughter] And I want to thank you for your understanding about the mayor telling me not to come. [Laughter] He blamed it on the police chief. [Laughter] Actually, it was the right call. And I want to thank you all for your patience. Thank you for letting me come back.

I generally try to stay on time. I'm running a little late. I met with some special people in order for me to—before I came over here, so thanks. There's nothing worse than a politician making people wait. I think I've got a pretty good excuse. I met with the family of a fellow who was killed in Iraq. It's part of my duty; it's part of my obligation. It was an uplifting experience to meet with a family that loves their country. I told the dad and the mom and the wife that we'd stay the course, we'd do what's right, and their son would not have died in vain.

If you're noticing me working my shoulder a little bit, it's because after dinner I've got to go out and deliver a hopping fastball to open up the baseball season. I can't run very far—just hope I can throw 60 foot and 6 inches. [Laughter]

And the Vice President, by the way, is venturing out to the mound. He's been warming up. It turns out we don't need a radar gun on him either. [Laughter] Speaking about the Vice President, he's the finest Vice President our Nation has ever had. Mother heard me say that and said, "Wait a minute, boy." [Laughter]

I'm sorry Laura's not here. She's with her mother in Midland, Texas. We were both raised in Midland. She's helping her mom move out of her—the home she was raised in. Her mom is getting up in years, and Laura is doing her duty as a loyal daughter. Let me just tell you, this is a lady who's got her life in perspective. Her faith and her family come first. And I love her. She is a fabulous First Lady for the country. She sends her love. I'm going to see her tonight in Crawford. We're going to spend the Easter time in Crawford. I'm going to be working out at the Western White House, as we call it—the Southwestern White House. But I'll give her—you her best.

I appreciate Thompson and Hance. Those boys delivered a fine introduction, didn't they? They are silver-tongued devils from—[laughter]—Charlotte. But I want to thank Ken and Jim for their leadership on this event. I'm proud to have you on my team. I appreciate you working so hard to make this fundraiser so successful. I appreciate Ed McMahan as well for being one of the event chairmen. Thank you for your help.

I remember campaigning here and saying to the people of North Carolina that the best choice they had for the United States Senate was Elizabeth Dole, that she'd do a great job for the citizens of this State. And she has—really proud of the job Elizabeth is doing. She works hard. She's well versed on the issues. She's articulate. She's making a big difference, a big difference in a short period of time on the floor of