

The President's News Conference April 3, 2007

The President. Good morning. I've just had a good meeting with Secretary of Defense Bob Gates and General Pete Pace, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Secretary Gates and General Pace updated me on the deployment of American reinforcements to Iraq.

At this moment, two of the five additional U.S. Army brigades we are sending for this mission are operating in Baghdad. A third brigade is now moving from Kuwait and will be fully operational in Baghdad in the coming weeks. And the remaining two brigades will deploy in April and May. It will be early June before all U.S. forces dedicated to the operation are in place, so this operation is still in its beginning stages.

The reinforcements we've sent to Baghdad are having a impact. They're making a difference. And as more of those reinforcements arrive in the months ahead, their impact will continue to grow. But to succeed in their mission, our troops need Congress to provide the resources, funds, and equipment they need to fight our enemies.

It has now been 57 days since I requested that Congress pass emergency funds for our troops. Instead of passing clean bills that fund our troops on the frontlines, the House and Senate have spent this time debating bills that undercut the troops by substituting the judgment of politicians in Washington for the judgment of our commanders on the ground, setting an arbitrary deadline for withdrawal from Iraq, and spending billions of dollars on porkbarrel projects completely unrelated to the war.

I made it clear for weeks that if either the House or Senate version of this bill comes to my desk, I will veto it. And it is also clear from the strong support for this position in both Houses that the veto would be sustained. The only way the

Democrats were able to pass their bill in the first place was to load the bill with pork and other spending that has nothing to do with the war.

Here's what one leading Democrat in the House said, quote, "A lot of things had to go into that bill that certainly those of us who respect great legislation did not want there." That's an honest appraisal of the process that we just witnessed. Still, the Democrats in Congress continue to pursue their bills, and now they have left Washington for spring recess without finishing the work.

Democrat leaders in Congress seem more interested in fighting political battles in Washington than in providing our troops what they need to fight the battles in Iraq. If Democrat leaders in Congress are bent on making a political statement, then they need to send me this unacceptable bill as quickly as possible when they come back. I'll veto it, and then Congress can get down to the business of funding our troops without strings and without delay.

If Congress fails to act in the next few weeks, it will have significant consequences for our men and women in the Armed Forces. As the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Pace recently stated during his testimony before a House subcommittee, if Congress fails to pass a bill I can sign by mid-April, the Army will be forced to consider cutting back on equipment, equipment repair, and quality of life initiatives for our Guard and Reserve forces. These cuts would be necessary because the money will have to be shifted to support the troops on the frontlines.

The Army also would be forced to consider curtailing some training for Guard and Reserve units here at home. This would reduce their readiness and could delay their availability to mobilize for missions in Afghanistan and Iraq. If Congress

fails to pass a bill I can sign by mid-May, the problems grow even more acute. The Army would be forced to consider slowing or even freezing funding for its depots, where the equipment our troops depend on is repaired. They will also have to consider delaying or curtailing the training of some active duty forces, reducing the availability of these forces to deploy overseas. If this happens, some of the forces now deployed in Afghanistan and Iraq may need to be extended because other units are not ready to take their places.

If Congress does not act, the Army may also have to delay the formation of new brigade combat teams, preventing us from getting those troops into the pool of forces that are available to deploy. If these new teams are unavailable, we would have to ask other units to extend in the theater.

In a letter to Congress, Army Chief of Staff General Pete Schoomaker put it this way: "Without approval of the supplemental funds in April, we will be forced to take increasingly draconian measures, which will impact Army readiness and impose hardships on our soldiers and their families."

In a time of war, it's irresponsible for the Democrat leadership in—Democratic leadership in Congress to delay for months on end while our troops in combat are waiting for the funds. The bottom line is this: Congress's failure to fund our troops on the frontlines will mean that some of our military families could wait longer for their loved ones to return from the frontlines, and others could see their loved ones headed back to the war sooner than they need to. That is unacceptable to me, and I believe it is unacceptable to the American people.

Members of Congress say they support the troops. Now they need to show that support in deed as well as in word. Members of Congress are entitled to their views and should express them. Yet debating these differences should not come at the expense of funding our troops.

Congress's most basic responsibility is to give our troops the equipment and training they need to fight our enemies and protect our Nation. They're now failing in that responsibility, and if they do not change course in the coming weeks, the price of that failure will be paid by our troops and their loved ones.

I'll now answer some questions, starting with Jennifer Loven [Associated Press].

Syria

Q. Thank you, sir. You've agreed to talk to Syria in the context of these international conferences on Iraq—

The President. Excuse me?

Q. You've agreed to talk to Syria in the context of the international conferences on Iraq. What's so different or wrong about Speaker Pelosi having her own meetings there? And are you worried that she might be preempting your own efforts?

The President. We have made it clear to high-ranking officials, whether they be Republicans or Democrats, that going to Syria sends mixed signals—signals in the region and, of course, mixed signals to President Asad. And by that, I mean, photo opportunities and/or meetings with President Asad lead the Asad Government to believe they're part of the mainstream of the international community, when, in fact, they're a state sponsor of terror; when, in fact, they're helping expedite—or at least not stopping the movement of foreign fighters from Syria into Iraq; when, in fact, they have done little to nothing to rein in militant Hamas and Hizballah; and when, in fact, they destabilize the Lebanese democracy.

There have been a lot of people who have gone to see President Asad—some Americans, but a lot of European leaders, high-ranking officials. And yet we haven't seen action; in other words, he hasn't responded. It's one thing to send a message, it's another thing to have the person receiving the message actually do something. So the position of this administration is that

the best way to meet with a leader like Asad or people from Syria is in the larger context of trying to get the global community to help change his behavior. But sending delegations hasn't worked. It's just simply been counterproductive.

Steve [Steve Holland, Reuters].

British Military Personnel Held in Iran

Q. Thank you, sir. Would the U.S. be willing to give up 5 Iranians held in Iraq if it would help persuade Iran to give up the 15 British sailors?

The President. Steven, I said the other day that—first of all, the seizure of the sailors is indefensible by the Iranians and that I support the Blair Government's attempts to solve this issue peacefully. So we're in close consultation with the British Government. I also strongly support the Prime Minister's declaration that there should be no quid pro quos when it comes to the hostages.

Let's see here—Baker, Baker [Peter Baker, Washington Post]. Are you here? Yes, there you are.

Department of Justice

Q. Sir, your administration evaluated all 93 U.S. attorneys, in part on the basis of loyalty. That was one of the criteria that was used. What role should loyalty to you play in the evaluation of those charged with administering justice and enforcing the law?

The President. Peter, obviously, when you name a U.S. attorney, you want somebody who can do the job. That's the most important criterion, somebody who is qualified, somebody who can get a job done. The President names the U.S. attorneys, and the President has the right to remove U.S. attorneys. And on this particular issue, the one you're referring to, I believe it's the current issue of the U.S.—eight U.S. attorneys. They serve at my pleasure. They have served 4-year terms, and we have every right to replace them. And—

Q. And what—

The President. Let me finish, please. I am genuinely concerned about their reputations, now that this has become a Washington, DC, focus. I'm sorry it's come to this. On the other hand, there had been no credible evidence of any wrongdoing. And that's what the American people have got to understand. We had a right to remove them; we did remove them. And there will be more hearings to determine what I've just said, no credible evidence of wrongdoing.

Bill [Bill Plante, CBS News].

Iraq/Situation in Baghdad

Q. Mr. President, a lot of the disagreement over—

The President. Wrong Bill.

Q. Which one—him?

The President. No, you. The cute-looking one. [Laughter]

Q. Thanks so much. A lot of the disagreement, sir, over the way you're handling Iraq, disagreements from the public and Congress, stems from the belief that things are not working, despite the surge. The Iraqis have met few, if any, of the benchmarks that were laid down for them so far. Senator McCain walked in the Baghdad marketplace with air cover and a company of troops. But people don't believe that this can work, and they question the continued sacrifice of U.S. troops to help make it work.

The President. Yes, Bill, I'm very aware that there are a group of people that don't think we should be there in the first place. There are some who don't believe that this strategy will work. I've listened carefully to their complaints. Obviously, I listened to these concerns prior to deciding to reinforce. This is precisely the debate we had inside the White House: Can we succeed? I know there are some who have basically said, it is impossible to succeed. I strongly disagree with those people. I believe not only can we succeed; I know we must succeed.

And so I decided to, at the recommendation of military commanders, decided to send reinforcements. As opposed to leaving Baghdad and watching the country go up in flames, I chose a different route, which is to send more troops into Baghdad. And General Petraeus, who is a reasoned, sober man, says there is some progress being made. And he cites murders and—in other words, there's some calm coming to the capital. But he also fully recognizes, as do I, it's still dangerous. In other words, suiciders are willing to kill innocent life in order to send the projection that this is an impossible mission.

The whole strategy is to give the Iraqi Government time to reconcile, time to unify the country, time to respond to the demands of the 12 million people that voted.

You've said the Iraqis haven't met any obligations; I would disagree with your characterization. They have said that they will send Iraqi forces into Baghdad to take the lead, along with U.S. troops, to bring security to Baghdad, and they've done that. They said they'd name a commander for Baghdad; they have done that. They said they'd send up—they'd send troops out into the neighborhoods to clear and hold and then build; they're doing that. They said they would send a budget up that would spend a considerable amount of their money on reconstruction; they have done that. They're working on an oil law that is in progress.

As a matter of fact, I spoke to the Prime Minister yesterday about progress on the oil law. He reminded me that sometimes the legislature doesn't do what the executive branch wants them to do. I reminded him, I understand what he's talking about. But, nevertheless, I strongly agree that we've got to continue to make it clear to the Iraqi Government that this is—the solution to Iraq, an Iraq that can govern itself, sustain itself, and defend itself, is more than a military mission, precisely the reason why I sent more troops into Baghdad, to

be able to provide some breathing space for this democratically elected Government to succeed. And it's hard work, and I understand it's hard work.

Secondly, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, Bill, there's only 40 percent of our troops that are there on the ground. And that's why I find it somewhat astounding that people in Congress would start calling for withdrawal even before all the troops have made it to Baghdad.

Let's see here—Rutenberg. Jim Rutenberg [New York Times].

Public Opinion/War in Iraq

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. Matthew Dowd, your chief campaign strategist in 2004, kind of issued a strong critique of you and your administration this weekend. I'm wondering if you were personally stung, and if you worry about losing support of people—of him and people like him?

The President. First of all, I respect Matthew. I've known him for awhile. As you mentioned, he was an integral part of my 2004 campaign. I have not talked to Matthew about his concerns. Nevertheless, I understand his anguish over war. I understand that this is an emotional issue for Matthew, as it is a lot of other people in our country. Matthew's case, as I understand it, is obviously intensified because his son is deployable. In other words, he's got a son in the U.S. Armed Forces, and, I mean, I can understand Matthew's concerns.

I would hope that people who share Matthew's point of view would understand my concern about what failure would mean to the security of the United States. What I'm worried about is that we leave before the mission is done—and that is a country that is able to govern, sustain, and defend itself—and that Iraq becomes a cauldron of chaos, which will embolden extremists, whether they be Shi'a or Sunni extremists; which would enable extremists to have safe

haven from which to plot attacks on America; which could provide new resources for an enemy that wants to harm us.

And so, on the one hand, I do fully understand the anguish people go through about this war. And it's not just Matthew; there's a lot of our citizens who are concerned about this war. But I also hope that people will take a sober look at the consequences of failure in Iraq. My main job is to protect the people, and I firmly believe that if we were to leave before the job is done, the enemy would follow us here. And what makes Iraq different from previous struggles is that September the 11th showed that chaos in another part of the world—and/or safe haven for killers, for radicals—affects the security of the United States.

Martha [Martha Raddatz, ABC News].

Iran

Q. Back to Iran, sir. ABC has been reporting that Iran will be capable of building a nuclear bomb within 2 years. Have you seen evidence that Iran is accelerating its nuclear program?

The President. I haven't seen the report that you just referred to. I do share concerns about Iranian intention to have a nuclear weapon. I firmly believe that if Iran were to have a nuclear weapon, it would be a seriously destabilizing influence in the Middle East. And therefore, we have worked to build a international coalition to try to convince the Iranians to give up their weapon, to make it clear that they have choices to make—whether the choice be isolation or missed opportunity to grow their economies. And so we take your—we take seriously the attempts of the Iranians to gain a nuclear weapon.

Q. Have you seen evidence of an acceleration, though?

The President. You know, I'm not going to talk about any intelligence that I've seen, one way or the other. But I do want you to know how seriously we take the Iranian nuclear issue. As a matter of fact, it is

the cornerstone of our Iranian policy. It is—and that's why we spend a lot of time in working with friends, allies, concerned people to rally international support, to make it clear to the Iranian people that there is a better option for them.

Now, we have no problem, no beef with the Iranian people. We value their history; we value their traditions. But their government is making some choices that will continue to isolate them and deprive them of a better economic future. So we take the issue very seriously.

Ken Herman [Cox News].

Price of Gasoline/Alternative Fuel Sources

Q. Thank you, sir. Mr. President, are you aware of the current price of a gallon of gas? Can you explain why it's gone up so sharply in recent weeks? And is there anything in the near future indicating the prices might start coming down again before the heavy summer driving season?

The President. About 2.60 plus. Gas—

Q. Where are you shopping, sir? [Laughter]

The President. Nationwide average. The price of gasoline obviously varies from region to region for a variety of reasons. Some has to do with the amount of taxation at the pump, some of it has to do with the boutique fuels that have been mandated on a State-by-State basis, but a lot of the price of gasoline depends on the price of crude oil.

And the price of crude oil is on the rise, and the price of crude oil is on the rise because people get spooked, for example, when it looks like there may be a crisis with a crude oil-producing nation like Iran. But the whole point about rising crude oil prices and rising gasoline prices is that this country ought to work hard to get off our addiction to oil—all the more reason why Congress ought to pass the mandatory fuel standards that I set forth, which will reduce our use of gasoline by 20 percent over the next 10 years. And there's two reasons why: One is for national security concerns, and

two is for environmental concerns. And I hope that we can get this done with the Congress, get it out of the Congress to my desk as quickly as possible.

Dancer. Dancing man. That would be David Gregory [NBC News]. For those of you not aware, Gregory put on a show the other—

Congressional Action on Emergency Supplemental Appropriations

Q. Everybody's aware, Mr. President, thank you. [Laughter]

The President. Well, maybe the listeners aren't.

Q. Yes, that's all right.

The President. That was a beautiful performance—seriously.

Q. Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. President. [Laughter] Mr. President, you say the Democrats are undercutting troops, the way they have voted. They're obviously trying to assert more control over foreign policy. Isn't that what the voters elected them to do, in November?

The President. I think the voters in America want Congress to support our troops in—who are in harm's way. They want money to the troops, and they don't want politicians in Washington telling our generals how to fight a war. It's one thing to object to the policy, but it's another thing when you have troops in harm's way not to give them the funds they need.

And no question there's been a political dance going on here in Washington. You've followed this closely; you know what I'm talking about. Not only was there a political dance going on—in other words, people were trying to appeal to one side of their party or another—but they then had to bring out new funding streams in order to attract votes to a emergency war supplemental.

And my concern, David, is several: One, Congress shouldn't tell generals how to run the war; Congress should not shortchange our military; Congress should not use a emergency war spending measure as a vehi-

cle to put pet spending projects on that have nothing to do with the war.

Secondly, as I mentioned in these remarks, delays beyond mid-April and then into May will affect the readiness of the U.S. military. So my attitude is, enough politics. They need to come back, pass a bill. If they want to play politics, fine. They continue to do that; I will veto it. But they ought to do it quickly. They ought to get the bill to my desk as quickly as possible, and I'll veto it. And then we can get down to the business of funding our troops without strings and without withdrawal dates.

It is amazing to me that, one, the United States Senate passed a—confirmed General Petraeus overwhelmingly, after he testified as to what he thinks is necessary to succeed in Iraq, and then won't fund him. Secondly, we have put 40 percent of the reinforcements in place, and yet people already want to start withdrawing before the mission has had a chance to succeed.

They need to come off their vacation, get a bill to my desk, and if it's got strings and mandates and withdrawals and pork, I'll veto it. And then we can get down to the business of getting this thing done, and we can do it quickly. It doesn't have to take a lot of time. And we can get the bill—get the troops funded, and we go about our business of winning this war.

McKinnon [John McKinnon, Wall Street Journal].

Massachusetts v. Environmental Protection Agency

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. On climate change and the decision that was issued yesterday by the U.S. Supreme Court, what's your reaction to that decision? And don't you think that this makes some kind of broad caps on greenhouse gas emissions more or less inevitable?

The President. First of all, the decision of the Supreme Court is—we take very seriously. It's the new law of the land. And secondly, we're taking some time to fully understand the details of the decision. As

you know, this decision was focused on emissions that come from automobiles. My attitude is, is that we have laid out a plan that will affect greenhouse gases that come from automobiles by having a mandatory fuel standard that insists upon 35—using 35 billion gallons of alternative fuels by 2017, which will reduce our gasoline usage by 20 percent and halt the growth in greenhouse gases that emanate from automobiles. In other words, there is a remedy available for Congress, and I strongly hope that they pass this remedy quickly.

In terms of the broader issue, first of all, I've taken this issue very seriously. I have said that it is a serious problem. I recognize that man is contributing greenhouse gases, that—but here are the principles by which I think we can get a good deal. One, anything that happens cannot hurt economic growth. And I say that because, one, I care about the working people of the country, but also because, in order to solve the greenhouse gas issue over a longer period of time, it's going to require new technologies, which tend to be expensive. And it's easier to afford expensive technologies if you're prosperous.

Secondly, whatever we do must be in concert with what happens internationally because we could pass any number of measures that are now being discussed in the Congress, but unless there is an accord with China, China will produce greenhouse gases that will offset anything we do in a brief period of time.

And so those are the principles that will guide our decisionmaking. How do you encourage new technology? How do you grow the economy? And how do you make sure that China is—and India are a part of a rational solution?

Let's see here—how about Bret Baier [FOX News]?

Homosexuals in the Military

Q. Mr. President, thank you. Since General Pace made his comments that got a lot of attention about homosexuality, we

haven't heard from you on that issue. Do you, sir, believe that homosexuality is immoral?

The President. I will not be rendering judgment about individual orientation. I do believe the “don't ask, don't tell” policy is good policy.

Sammon [Bill Sammon, Washington Times], yes.

Congressional Action on Emergency Supplemental Appropriations/War on Terror

Q. Thank you, Mr. President.

The President. You're standing out there; I can see you.

Q. When Congress has linked war funding with a timetable, you have argued micromanagement. When they've linked it to unrelated spending, you've argued porkbarrel. But now there's talk from Harry Reid and others that if you veto this bill, they may come back and just simply cut off funding. Wouldn't that be a legitimate exercise of a congressional authority, which is the power of the purse?

The President. The Congress is exercising its legitimate authority as it sees fit right now. I just disagree with their decisions. I think setting an artificial timetable for withdrawal is a significant mistake. It is a—it sends mixed signals, bad signals to the region and to the Iraqi citizens.

Listen, the Iraqis are wondering whether or not we're going to stay to help. People in America wonder whether or not they've got the political will to do the hard work—that's what Plante was asking about. My conversations with President [Prime Minister]* Maliki, he seems dedicated to doing that, and we will continue to work with him to achieve those objectives. But they're wondering whether or not America is going to keep commitments. And so when they hear withdrawal and timetables, it, rightly so, sends different kinds of signals.

* White House correction.

It's interesting that Harry Reid, Leader Reid, spoke out with a different option. Whatever option they choose, I would hope they get home, get a bill, and get it to my desk. And if it has artificial timetables of withdrawal or if it cuts off funding for troops or if it tells our generals how to run a war, I'll veto it. And then we can get about the business of giving our troops what they need—what our generals want them to have, and give our generals the flexibility necessary to achieve the objectives that we set out by reinforcing troops in Iraq.

You know, what's interesting is, you don't hear a lot of debate about Washington as to what will happen if there is failure. Again, Plante mentioned that people don't think we can succeed; in other words, there's no chance of succeeding. That's a part of the debate. But what people also have got to understand is what will happen if we fail. And the way you fail is to leave before the job is done; in other words, just abandon this young democracy, say, "We're tired; we'll withdraw from Baghdad," and hope there's not chaos.

I believe that if this capital city were to fall into chaos, which is where it was headed prior to reinforcing, that there would be no chance for this young democracy to survive. That's why I made the decision I made. And the reason why I believe it's important to help this young democracy survive is so that the country has a chance to become a stabilizing influence in a dangerous part of the world.

I also understand that if the country—if the experience were to fail, radicals would be emboldened. People that had been—that can't stand America would find new ways to recruit. There would be potentially additional resources for them to use at their disposal.

The failure in Iraq would endanger American security. I have told the American people often: It is best to defeat them there so we don't have to face them here, fully recognizing that what happens over

there can affect the security here. That's one of the major lessons of September the 11th. In that case, there was safe haven found in a failed state, where killers plotted and planned and trained and came and killed 3,000 of our citizens. And I vowed we weren't going to let that happen again.

Secondly, the way to defeat the ideology that these people believe is through a competing ideology, one based upon liberty and human rights and human dignity. And there are some who, I guess, say that's impossible to happen in the Middle East. I strongly disagree. I know it is hard work. I believe it is necessary work to secure this country in the long run.

Ed [Ed Henry, Cable News Network].

Cooperation With Congress/Legislative Agenda

Q. Mr. President, the conservative newspaper columnist, Robert Novak, recently wrote that in 50 years of covering Washington, he's never seen a President more isolated than you are right now. What do you say to critics like Novak who say that you are more isolated now than Richard Nixon was during Watergate?

The President. How did he define isolated?

Q. He said you're isolated primarily from your own party, that Republican leaders on the Hill were privately telling him that, on the Gonzales matter in particular, you're very isolated.

The President. I think you're going to find that the White House and the Hill are going to work in close collaboration, starting with this supplemental. When I announced that I will veto a bill with—that withdrew our troops, that set artificial timetables for withdrawal or micromanaged the war, the Republicans strongly supported that message. I think you'll find us working together on energy. They know what I know, that dependence on oil will affect the long-term national security of the country. We'll work together on No Child Left

Behind. We'll work together on immigration reform. We'll work together, most importantly, on budget, to make sure this budget gets balanced without raising taxes.

The other day, the Democrats submitted budgets that raised taxes on the working people, in order to increase the amount of money they have available for spending. That is a place where the Republicans and this President are going to work very closely together. I adamantly oppose tax increases, and so do the majority of Members in the United States Congress.

Ed [Edwin Chen, Los Angeles Times].

Homeland Security

Q. Mr. President, good morning. You've talked—

The President. Good morning. Good morning, that's a good way to start.

Q. You've talked about the consequences of failure in Iraq, and you've said that enemies would follow us home. I wonder, given that, it seems like that's not exactly a ringing endorsement of people who are charged with the responsibility of keeping America safe. So what—

The President. What was that again, Ed?

Q. Well, you say that the enemies would follow us home if—

The President. I will—that's what they'll do, just like September the 11th. They plotted, planned, and attacked.

Q. So I wonder, in your own mind, how does that vision play out? How do they follow us home? Because we've spent so much money and put so much resources into making this country safer.

The President. Ed, I'm not going to predict to you the methodology they'll use. Just you need to know they want to hit us again. We do everything we can here at the homeland to protect us. That's why I've got a Homeland Security Department. That's why we are inconveniencing air traffickers, to make sure nobody is carrying weapons on airplanes. That's why we need border enforcement, with a comprehensive immigration bill, by the way, to make sure

it's easier to enforce the border. I mean, we're doing a lot. That's why we need to make sure our intelligence services coordinate information better.

So we spend a lot of time trying to protect this country. But if they were ever to have safe haven, it would make the efforts much harder. That's my point. We cannot let them have safe haven again. The lesson of September the 11th is, if these killers are able to find safe haven from which to plot, plan, and attack, they would do so.

So, Ed, I don't know what methodology they'll use. We're planning for the worst. We cover all fronts. And it's hard to protect a big country like this, and I applaud those who have done a fantastic job of protecting us since September the 11th. But make no mistake about it: there's still an enemy that would like to do us harm. And I believe, whether it be in Afghanistan or in Iraq or anywhere else, if these enemy is able to find safe haven, it will endanger the lives of our fellow citizens.

I also understand that the best way to defeat them in the long run is to show people in the Middle East, for example, that there is a better alternative to tyrannical societies, to societies that don't meet the hopes and aspirations of the average people. And that is through a society that is based upon the universal concept of liberty.

Iraq is a very important part of securing the homeland, and it's a very important part of helping change the Middle East into a part of the world that will not serve as a threat to the civilized world, to people like—or to the developed world, to people like—in the United States.

So thank you all very much for your interest. I hope you have a nice holiday. Appreciate it.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 10:09 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Bashar al-Asad of Syria; Prime

Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom; Gen. David H. Petraeus, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq; Lt. Gen. Abboud Gambar, Iraqi commander of

Baghdad, Iraqi Army; and Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki of Iraq. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Remarks to Military Personnel and Their Families at Fort Irwin, California April 4, 2007

The President. Thank you, all. I've been waiting all day to say, "Hooah!"

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. Thank you for greeting me. General Cone, thanks. I appreciate your service to our country, and thanks for leading these men and women. I'm honored also to be with Jill. Thank you for joining us today for lunch. Command Sergeant Kim Boyink has been a generous host. Sarge, I appreciate being with you. Thank you for your service. Thanks for setting such a good example for the enlisted folks.

I often tell people that the backbone of the Army is the sergeant.

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. And I appreciate you sergeants who have joined us here, and I appreciate you serving.

I want to thank two Members of the United States Congress who have traveled with me today, men who have concerns about Fort Irwin and have reflected those concerns in different appropriations measures in the United States Congress. In other words, they understand the importance of this mission, and they understand the importance of making sure the folks who are stationed here have the best possible housing and food—could work a little bit on it, but—[*laughter*]. But I do want to introduce to you the Congressmen from this district, Congressman Buck McKeon. Where are you, Buck? There he is. Thanks, Buck. And Congressman Jerry Lewis, ranking member of the Appropriations Committee.

I'm proud to be here with Mayor Dale of the city of Barstow. I appreciate you coming, Mr. Mayor. It's nice of you to be here. Thanks for being here.

I appreciate not only those who wear the uniform who are here today; I want to thank your families, too, for coming. It means a lot to me to be with our military families. I'll say a word about our military families here in a minute.

I do want to thank those who have just returned from Afghanistan, the 699th Maintenance Company.

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. I guess the best words I can say are, welcome—I mean, thanks, and welcome back. We're glad you're here.

I appreciate those of you who are about to deploy in an important theater in this war against radicals and extremists, this war on terror: the "Red Devils" of the 58th Engineers, the "Renegades" of the 557th Maintenance Company, the "Super HET" of the 2d Transportation Company. I appreciate you—[*applause*].

Ours is a remarkable country when people volunteer to serve our country in a time of war. The amazing thing about our United States military is, thousands and thousands have signed up knowing full well that we're a nation at war. The Government didn't say: You have to do this; you choose—you chose to do it on your own. You decided to put your country ahead of self in many ways. I'm proud to be the Commander in Chief of such decent people, such honorable people, and such noble