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Remarks Prior to Discussions With Chairman Hamid Karzai of the Afghan Interim Authority and an Exchange With Reporters

January 28, 2002

The President. It's a great honor for me to welcome to the White House the Chairman of the Afghan Interim Authority, Hamid Karzai.

Mr. Chairman, welcome.

Chairman Karzai. Thank you very much.

The President. I also want to welcome the ministers of the Interim Authority who have accompanied him to Washington. Chairman Karzai is a determined leader, and his Government reflects the hopes of all Afghans for a new and better future, a future free from terror, free from war, and free from want. The United States strongly supports Chairman Karzai's interim Government. And we strongly support the Bonn agreement that provides the Afghan people with a path towards a broadly based government that protects the human rights of all its citizens.

The Afghan people have already taken the first steps along this path by committing to rid their country of Al Qaida terrorists and remnants of the Taliban regime who supported the terrorists. Yet, even as the war against terrorism continues, the world has also begun to help the Afghan people win the peace they deserve.

The United States is committed to building a lasting partnership with Afghanistan. We'll help the new Afghan Government provide the security that is the foundation for peace. Today, peacekeepers from around the world are helping provide security on the streets of Kabul. The United States will continue to work closely with these forces and provide support for their mission. We will also support programs to train new police officers and to help establish and train an Afghanistan national military.

The United States is also committed to playing a leading role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Today I announce the United States Overseas Private Investment Corporation will provide an additional $50 million line of credit for Afghanistan to finance private sector projects. This announcement builds on the United States' pledge in Tokyo earlier this month to provide $297 million this year to create jobs and to start rebuilding Afghanistan's agricultural sector, its health care system, and its educational system. Yet these efforts are only the beginning.

Two days ago, for the first time since 1979, an American flag was raised over the U.S. Agency for International Development's mission in Kabul. That flag will not be lowered. It will wave long into the future, a symbol of America's enduring commitment to Afghanistan's future.

Chairman Karzai, I reaffirm to you today that the United States will continue to be a friend to the Afghan people in all the challenges that lie ahead. Welcome to Washington.

Chairman Karzai. Thank you very much.

Well, thank you very much, Mr. President. Although we are here, as I mentioned in my meeting with you, invited by you, for which we are very grateful, but we are also here in a way to thank you and the American people for the great help that we were given to liberate our country once again, this time from terrorism from the Taliban. The Afghan people recognize this help. They know that, without this help, we would have still probably been under that rule. So thank you very much to you and, through you, to the American people.

Afghanistan is a good partner. It will stay a good partner. And I'm sure that the future of the two countries will be good, and a wonderful relationship should be expected to come in the future. Thank you very much for the help that you gave us during the Tokyo conference, and thank you for organizing that, as well, together with other co-organizers. And thank you for the help that you announced today. Afghanistan does need help in reconstruction. Afghanistan does need help in the rebuilding of its national army. And thank you very much for doing that, too.

I assure you, Mr. President, that Afghanistan, with your help and the help of other countries, friends, will be strong and will stand eventually on its own feet. And it will be a country that will defend its borders and not allow terrorism to return to it or bother it or trouble it. We'll be self-reliant. We'll

do good in business. We'll be a strong country.

Afghanistan knows, Mr. President, the suffering of those people in America that saw and went through the horrors of the Twin Tower incident, the terrorism there. I believe the Afghans are the best people to see the pain exactly the way it was felt there then, at the time, because the Afghans have suffered exactly in the same way. We have sympathy; we know that pain; we understand it. Our families know that pain.

Therefore, this joint struggle against terrorism should go to the absolute end of it. We must finish them. We must bring them out of their caves and their hideouts, and we promise we'll do that.

Thank you very much, again, for having us here. It was an honor, and we enjoy our trip to the U.S, myself and my colleagues. Thank you very much.

The President. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We'll answer a couple of questions. Steve [Steve Holland, Reuters], Sonya [Sonya Ross, Associated Press].

Guantanamo Bay Detainees

Q. On the issue of the detainees at Guantanamo Bay, what's wrong with formally applying the Geneva Convention to them?

The President. I have—the question is about the detainees in Guantanamo Bay. I had a very interesting meeting this morning with my national security team. We're discussing all the legal ramifications of how we—what we—how we characterize the actions at Guantanamo Bay. A couple of things we agree on: One, they will not be treated as prisoners of war; they're illegal combatants. Secondly, they will be treated humanely. And then, I'll figure out—I'll listen to all the legalisms and announce my decision when I make it. But we're in total agreement on how to—on whether or not—on how these prisoners, or detainees, excuse me, ought to be treated. And they'll be treated well.

And yesterday the Secretary of Defense went down to Guantanamo Bay with United States Senators from both political parties. The Senators got to see the circumstances in which these detainees were being held. They—I don't want to put words in their mouth, but according to the Secretary of Defense—I'll let him put words in their mouth—they felt like, one, that our troops were really valiant in their efforts to make sure that these killers—these are killers—were held in such a way that they were safe. I noticed one of our troops last night was commenting that they are receiving very good medical care. But I'll make my decision about—on how to legally interpret the situation here pretty soon.

Sonya.

General Accounting Office and the Energy Task Force

Q. Are you prepared to go to court with the General Accounting Office to keep secret the records of your energy task force meetings?

The President. Well, the question about the General Accounting Office is this: Should an administration be allowed to have private conversations in this office without everybody knowing about it? This is a part of how you make decisions, is to call people in and say, "What's your opinion? What's your opinion on stem cell? What's your opinion on energy? What's your opinion on the war?"

And in order for me to be able to get good, sound opinions, those who offer me opinions or offer the Vice President opinions must know that every word they say is not going to be put into the public record. And so I view the GAO like the Vice President does. It's an encroachment on the executive branch's ability to conduct business.

Now, as far as the specific case of the energy report goes, there is an energy report that is now in the public arena. People are free to read it. I hope they do because it's a comprehensive report, one based upon the opinions of members of the exploration sector of the energy business; some about the infrastructure, opinions from those involved with the infrastructure; some opinions, obviously, from those in the environmental community. This is a report that collected a lot of opinions, and it was done in such a way that people felt free to come in and express their opinion.

And so, to answer your question, we're not going to let the ability for us to discuss matters between ourselves to become eroded. It's not only important for us, for this administration, it is an important principle for future administrations.

Gregory [David Gregory, NBC News].

Situation in the Middle East

Q. Mr. President, on the Middle East——

The President. Medium-size Stretch. [*Laughter*]

Q. When you spoke to President Mubarak today and expressed your disappointment in Yasser Arafat, what did he say? And secondly, are you worried that the level of disappointment in the region is not as high as your own? Does that complicate your efforts to build a coalition against Arafat that's necessary?

The President. I think members—I think—first of all, Mr. Mubarak can characterize the conversation the way he sees fit. I will just tell you what I told him. And I told him that in order for there to be peace in the Middle East, we must rout out terror wherever it exists. And the U.S. effort to rout out terror around the world is going to benefit the Middle East in the long term.

It is important for Mr. Arafat to not only renounce terror but to arrest those who would terrorize people trying to bring peace. There are people in the region that want there to be a peaceful settlement, and yet, obviously, terrorists are trying to prevent that from happening by wanton murder. And Mr. Arafat must join the effort to arrest them.

And when the ship showed up with weapons, obviously aimed at terrorizing that part of the world, I expressed my severe disappointment because I was led to believe that he was willing to join us in the fight on terror. I took him for his word when he—at Oslo. And so I made this very clear to my friend Hosni Mubarak, that ridding the Middle East of terror is going to make it more likely that there be peace and stability in the region.

Energy Task Force Report/Enron

Q. Mr. President, going back to the issue of the GAO lawsuit——

The President. Yes.

Q. ——some in Congress, particularly Congressman Waxman, have suggested that the energy report represented a wish list for Enron.

The President. The energy report represented a wish—in other words, we were doing favors for Enron?

Q. Do you agree with that, sir?

The President. Well, Enron went bust. Shortly after the report was put out, Enron went broke. And it went broke because, it seems like to me—and I will wait for the facts to come out—it went broke because there was not full disclosure of finances. This is a—what we're talking about here is a corporate governance issue. This is a business problem that our country must deal with and must fix; that is, full disclosure of liabilities, full understanding of the effects of decisions on pension funds, reform of a pension system, perhaps.

There are some on Capitol Hill who want to politicize this issue. This is not a political issue. It is a business issue that this Nation must deal with. And you know, Enron had made contributions to a lot of people around Washington, DC. And if they came to this administration looking for help, they didn't find any.

Now, obviously, we're interested in people's opinions about energy—those in the energy business, those in the conservation world, those who know how to develop infrastructure. And so we solicited a lot of opinions from people. And the report is now public; everybody can read it to determine our vision about how to make our country less dependent on foreign sources of crude oil, which we must do.

Yes, Jim [Jim Angle, FOX News].

Afghanistan

Q. Mr. President, we understand that you do not want to commit American troops to peacekeeping forces in Afghanistan. Why not, sir? And do you have any concerns that there will be enough forces to give Mr. Karzai the kind of security he needs?

The President. We are committing help to the ISAF in the form of logistical help, in the form of kind of a bailout—if the troops get in trouble, we stand ready to help—in the form of intelligence. Plus, I have just

made in my remarks here a significant change of policy, and that is that we're going to help Afghanistan develop her own military. That is the most important part of this visit, it seems like to me, besides the fact of welcoming a man who stands for freedom, a man who stood for freedom in the face of tyranny.

We have made a decision—both of us have made the decision that Afghanistan must, as quickly as possible, develop her own military. And we will help. We'll help train, and Tommy Franks, our general, fully understands this and is fully committed to this idea. So, better yet than peacekeepers—which will be there for a while, with our help—let's have Afghanistan have her own military.

Major [Major Garrett, Cable News Network].

2003 Budget Proposal/Tax Relief

Q. Mr. President, along the issue of politicizing Enron, the majority leader, Tom Daschle, with whom you in the past have said you have a good working relationship, said over the weekend that he was afraid your budget would Enronize Social Security and Medicare. That is to say, put them in specific jeopardy of collapsing. I wonder if you could comment on that, sir, and if there's any way to make this——

The President. Well, sometimes there's political hyperbole here in this town. The budget I submitted is one—will submit soon—is one that says that the war on terror is going on, and we're going to win, and we've got to make sure we spend enough money to win. It's also one that prioritizes homeland security. It is also one that wants to do something about our economy; let's get a stimulus bill. It's a bill that sets priorities.

And it is—I think there are some still upset with the tax cut, but I want to remind you that we were in recession in March of last year. That's when they officially declared recession. The slowdown was obviously significant to reach a point where we were—where the economists said we were in recession, and so the tax cuts came at the right time.

Now, there are some who believe if you raise taxes it makes the economy stronger. As I've told the American people several times, I don't understand what textbook they're reading. I believe by reducing taxes it makes the economy stronger. The tax relief came right at the right time. Now, our economy is still, you know, not as strong as it should be. There's still some weakness, but surely people aren't suggesting raising taxes at this point makes sense. I don't believe it does make any sense.

And so the budget I've submitted is a good, strong budget. It sets priorities, and it's realistic, and the American people will understand it when I explain it tomorrow night.

Yes, Terry [Terry Moran, ABC News].

Guantanamo Bay Detainees

Q. Mr. President, in holding the detainees in Cuba in the manner in which the United States is, is one of the signals you're sending that in this new kind of war, as you've described it, the Geneva Conventions are outdated and don't apply in the conflict with Al Qaida?

The President. No, the Geneva Conventions are not outdated, and it's a very important principle. First of all, Terry, we are adhering to the spirit of the Geneva Convention. When you say you're holding the prisoners in the manner you are—we're giving them medical care; they're being well-treated.

There is no allegation—well, there may be an allegation—there's no evidence that we're treating them outside the spirit of the Geneva Convention. And for those who say we are, they just don't know what they're talking about.

And so——

Q. Mr. President——

The President. Let me finish. And so I am looking at the legalities involved with the Geneva Convention. In either case, however I make my decision, these detainees will be well-treated. We are not going to call them prisoners of war, in either case, and the reason why is Al Qaida is not a known military. These are killers. These are terrorists. They know no countries. And the only thing they know about countries is when they find a country that's been weak, and they want to occupy it like a parasite. And that's why we're so pleased to join with Chairman Karzai to rout them out.

And so the prisoners, detainees, will be well-treated. They just won't be afforded prisoner-of-war status. I'll decide beyond that whether or not they can be noncombatants under the Geneva Convention, or not. I'll make that legal decision soon. But this administration has made the decision they'll be well-treated. Long before they arrived at Guantanamo Bay did we make that decision.

Plante [Bill Plante, CBS News].

Saudi Arabian Detainees

Q. Mr. President, the Saudi Interior Minister today said that a majority of those being held at Guantanamo, more than 100, are Saudi citizens, and asked that they be returned to Saudi Arabia for questioning.

The President. Well, I appreciate his request. And we will, of course—we'll take it under consideration. There are a lot of detainees around the world as a result of this first phase in the war against terror. There's a lot in Pakistan; there's a lot in Afghanistan; and there are 179, I believe, or whatever the number is, in Guantanamo Bay. So there's a lot of Saudi citizens that chose to fight for Al Qaida and/or the Taliban that we want to know more about. And so we'll make a decision on a case-by-case basis as to whether they go back to Saudi Arabia or not. I appreciate his suggestion.

Listen, I want to thank you all very much. Mr. Chairman, it's good to have you——

Q. May I ask Chairman Karzai a question?

The President. Ask who?

Q. May I ask Chairman Karzai something about——

The President. Of course you can ask Chairman Karzai a question. Thank you.

Q. Mr. President, I have a question——

The President. No, I'm sorry.

Afghanistan

Q. Chairman Karzai, given Afghanistan's history of fighting foreign invaders and its pride and independence, are you concerned about any political sensitivity—[*inaudible*]—in establishing an Afghan military? And how would you describe the ideal partnership between the United States?

Chairman Karzai. Well, we have no concerns there. As I mentioned in my remarks earlier, the Afghans are grateful that we were helped twice, once during the Soviet occupation, by the U.S., and now to fight terrorism and liberate ourselves from that menace. We are a fiercely independent country, and the world knows that. Our neighbors know that very well, and the countries in the region know that.

The Afghan request for training of our army is nothing new. Our prime ministers were here even back in the 1950's to ask this kind of training. And it's training and a relationship between two independent, sovereign countries, and nothing to worry others.

Usama bin Laden

Q. Chairman Karzai, have you discussed in regards with Usama bin Laden, and what can you do to gather more information to capture him?

Chairman Karzai. We are looking for him. He's a fugitive. If we find him, we'll catch him.

Thank you very much.

The President. That's right.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:58 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt; Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority; Minister of Interior Prince Nayef bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia; and Usama bin Laden, leader of the Al Qaida terrorist organization. The President also referred to the Report of the National Energy Policy Development Group, which was issued May 2001; and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Joint Statement by President George W. Bush and Chairman Hamid Karzai on a New Partnership Between the United States and Afghanistan

January 28, 2002

President Bush and Chairman Karzai commit to build a lasting partnership for the 21st century, determined to fight terrorism, and ensure security, stability and reconstruction for Afghanistan, and foster representative and accountable government for all Afghan