

I ask the Senate to join me in advancing the cause of freedom and strengthening NATO by providing its prompt advice and consent to these Protocols of Accession. My Administration stands ready to assist you as best we can in your deliberations.

George W. Bush

The White House,
April 10, 2003.

NOTE: This message was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on April 11.

**Remarks Following a Visit With
Troops Wounded in Operation Iraqi
Freedom and an Exchange With
Reporters in Bethesda, Maryland
April 11, 2003**

The President. Laura and I just had an extraordinary experience here at Bethesda and at—initially at Walter Reed, to thank our troops who've been overseas in Iraq for their dedication and courage and their service to the country. Because of troops like them, because of coalition troops, we've had an historic week.

I don't think I'll ever forget—I'm sure a lot of other people will never forget—the statue of Saddam Hussein falling in Baghdad, and then seeing the jubilation on the faces of ordinary Iraqis as they realized that the grip of fear that had them by the throat had been released—the first signs of freedom.

I came today to thank the troops and their families and their loved ones for their sacrifice. I also want to thank the staffs of these hospitals, the leadership, the doctors and the nurses, the people who care for those who have been hurt, for their extraordinary service to their fellow Americans.

Ours is an amazing country where a young soldier can be wounded on the battlefield and 4 days later be receiving the best health care possible. This country is dedicated to our military. We try to provide the very best we can. And here at Bethesda, at Walter Reed, our troops get the very best there is.

So Laura and I were here not only to thank our soldiers, but also to thank those in the medical profession who dedicate their lives to healing the hurt and to helping the fami-

lies. And that's exactly what's happening for our soldiers here in these two fine facilities.

I'll be glad to answer a couple of questions. Yes.

POWs and MIAs/Saddam Hussein

Q. Mr. President, what progress are we making in determining the whereabouts and well-being of American POWs and MIAs in Iraq? And the same goes for Saddam Hussein. And which do you see as the greater priority right now?

The President. The priority of this campaign is to rid the Iraqi people of any vestiges of Saddam Hussein and his regime so we can not only free the people but clear that country of weapons of mass destruction. I don't know the whereabouts of Saddam Hussein. I don't know if he's dead or alive. I do know he's no longer in power.

In terms of POWs, we will use every resource we have to find any POWs that are alive. And we pray that they are alive, because if they are, we'll find them.

Steve [Steve Holland, Reuters].

Victory Declaration/Media Coverage

Q. Why shouldn't we say that the war is over except for pockets of resistance, sir? And do you feel any certain sense of vindication after all those people questioned the war plan?

The President. I don't take anything personally. I committed our troops because I believe that Saddam Hussein and his regime posed a threat to the American people, posed a threat to anybody who loves freedom. We will achieve that objective. And at the same time, we will free the Iraqi people. And that's an important objective as well. We believe in freedom. We believe freedom is universal. We believe freedom is a gift from the Almighty God for every person, regardless of their race or their religion.

This war will end when our commanders in the field tell me that the objective has been achieved. And Tommy Franks put together a great strategy. Wonderful thing about free speech and a lot of TV stations is you get a lot of opinions. Some of them were right, and some of them were really wrong. But that's okay. That's what we—that's what we believe. We believe in free speech, believe people ought to be able to express their opinion.

Q. Sir, can you tell us, though, what you think specifically needs to happen for you to feel comfortable with the recommendation from General Franks that the war is over and victory has been achieved? Does Tikrit need to fall, the weapons of mass destruction—

The President. Hold on, I can't hear you. There's something beeping here. We've got a major beeper violation right here at Bethesda. [Laughter] Say it again, I'm—

Q. What are some of the specific things that you want to see? The weapons of mass destruction found and secured? Tikrit falling? Saddam found?

The President. The specific thing I want to hear is that our commanders say we've achieved the clear objective I set out. And that's when we will say this is over. This is a campaign that has been run on the frontlines by General Tommy Franks. And that's the way it's going to continue to be, that Tommy gets the—Tommy tells us what is necessary to achieve the objective. We gave Tommy the tools necessary to win. We agreed with his strategy, and he's running this war. And when Tommy says we've achieved our objective, that's when we've achieved our objective. I'm here in Washington, DC. He's there in Qatar, and he's got commanders in Baghdad. He's better to judge whether we've achieved the objective than I have.

Go ahead.

Q. Do you need to see the weapons of mass destruction found and secured?

The President. The war will end when Tommy Franks says we've achieved our objective.

Syria

Q. [Inaudible]—for Syria's failure to heed U.S. warnings?

The President. Syria just needs to know we expect full cooperation, and that we strongly urge them not to allow for Ba'ath Party members or Saddam's families or generals on the run to seek safe haven and find safe haven there. We expect them to do everything they can to prevent people who should be held to account from escaping in their country. And if they are in their country, we expect the Syrian authorities to turn them over to the proper folks.

President's Agenda

Q. As the war does come to an end, what domestic or foreign priorities are you going to turn your focus to quickly?

The President. That's a very speculative question about foreign priority. My priority right now is to win the war on terror. And that means we've got ongoing operations in Afghanistan. The Iraqi theater was a part of the war on terror, and we continue to fight the war on terror. So that's a major priority.

Beyond that, obviously, is the promotion of the health and well-being of citizens around the world. I'm very serious about the AIDS initiative for Africa. But we will continue to deal with it, and we will continue to deal with issues like proliferation.

At home, obviously I'm spending a lot of time on economic growth and working with Members of the United States Congress to encourage them to pass a stimulus package that will affect the economy so people can find work. I want to make sure Medicare gets done—that is, the reform of Medicare—so that seniors are able to receive the health care that they've been promised. I mean, there's a lot on my agenda.

Visits With Wounded Troops

Q. Were there any conversations, either here or at Walter Reed, that stood out to you? And what was their effect on you and Mrs. Bush?

The President. Conversations?

Q. Here or at Walter Reed that stood out.

The President. Well, I think the thing that stood out the most to me was seeing two wounded soldiers swear in as citizens of the United States, one man from Mexico, one man from the Philippines—people who had gone overseas, people who had risked their lives for peace and security and freedom—they wore the uniform of the United States military. And Laura and I got to see them sworn in as citizens. It was a very profound moment. We were both honored to witness this.

You know, we've got an amazing country, where—it's so powerful, values we believe that people would be willing to risk their own life and become a citizen after being wounded. It's an amazing moment. I'm really proud of them.

Yes, ma'am.

Morale of the Troops

Q. How was the morale of the marines and sailors?

The President. It's good. The Marines are a tough group—a tough group—as you know. And a lot of the troops wanted to get healed quickly so they could go back with their units. It's an amazing thing when you see a person wounded, sitting there in a wheelchair or bound up in bandages or these different looking metal things sticking out of them to hold them together—a young man look you in the eye and say, “I can't wait to get back to my unit. I hope I'm healed fast enough to get back to Iraq.”

It's a brave lot here in Bethesda, people who are willing to sacrifice for something greater than themselves. And I feel lucky as an American to be a part of a country where citizens are willing to do that.

I reminded them and their families that the war in Iraq is—it's really about peace, trying to make the world more peaceful. This victory in Iraq, when it happens, will make the world more peaceful. I reminded them that their sacrifices really had to do with the security of our country, that Saddam Hussein and his terrorist allies are threats to America, threats to our people because of what we believe in.

I also reminded them that their courageous sacrifice will help young Iraqis grow up in a free society, that out of the chaos that takes place there now and after the fear of a Saddam Hussein and his thugs, that the Iraqi people will run their own country, make their own decisions, choose their own leaders, and will become a country at peace with others in the neighborhood.

And so their sacrifices, as I told them, were worthwhile. And it's an honor to have spoken to them and to have been with them and their families today.

Thank you all very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:40 p.m. in the lobby at the National Naval Medical Center. In his remarks, he referred to former President Sad-

dam Hussein of Iraq; and Gen. Tommy R. Franks, USA, combatant commander, U.S. Central Command. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Statement on Congressional Action on the Budget Resolution

April 11, 2003

I commend House and Senate negotiators for their hard work and success in ensuring that the Congress has a budget resolution in place that reflects my priorities of winning the war against terrorism, protecting Americans at home, and strengthening economic growth. I particularly congratulate Chairmen Nickles and Nussle for their leadership, not only in accomplishing agreement but in doing so ahead of schedule. The compromise budget resolution funds our priorities, restrains spending, and provides opportunity for passage of a robust jobs-and-growth package. I commend the House for passing this measure and look forward to prompt passage in the Senate.

Statement on House of Representatives Passage of Comprehensive Energy Legislation

April 11, 2003

I commend the House for passing comprehensive and balanced energy legislation. The House legislation will increase America's energy independence by diversifying our sources of renewable energy, expanding new technology, and increasing environmentally responsible exploration. This bill is a major step forward in the effort to secure our Nation's energy future, in keeping with my National Energy Policy. I look forward to prompt Senate action and to working to ensure that fiscally responsible legislation to reduce our reliance on foreign sources of energy can be brought to my desk.