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The President's News Conference With Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom

July 17, 2003

President Bush. Good afternoon. It is, once again, a pleasure to welcome the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and Cherie Blair to the White House. Mr. Prime Minister, fabulous speech. Congratulations.

In his address to Congress this afternoon, Prime Minister Blair once again showed the qualities that have marked his entire career. Tony Blair is a leader of conviction, of passion, of moral clarity, and eloquence. He is a true friend of the American people. The United Kingdom has produced some of the world's most distinguished statesmen, and I'm proud to be standing with one of them today.

The close partnership between the United States and Great Britain has been and remains essential to the peace and security of all nations. For more than 40 years of the cold war, we stood together to ensure that the conflicts of Europe did not once again destroy the peace of the world. The duties we accepted were demanding, as we found during the Berlin blockade and other crises. Yet British and American leaders held firm, and our cause prevailed.

Now we are joined in another great and difficult mission. On September the 11th, 2001, America, Britain, and all free nations saw how the ideologies of hatred and terror in a distant part of the world could bring violence and grief to our own citizens. We resolved to fight these threats actively, wherever they gather, before they reach our shores. And we resolved to oppose these threats by promoting freedom and democracy in the Middle East, a region that has known so much bitterness and resentment.

From the outset, the Prime Minister and I have understood that we are allies in this war, a war requiring great effort and patience and fortitude. The British and American peoples will hold firm once again, and we will prevail.

The United States and Great Britain have conducted a steady offensive against terrorist networks and terror regimes. We're dismantling the Al Qaida network, leader by leader, and we're hunting down the terrorist killers, one by one.

In Afghanistan, we removed the cruel and oppressive regime that had turned that country into a training camp for Al Qaida, and now we are helping the Afghan people to restore their nation and regain self-government.

In Iraq, the United States, Britain, and other nations confronted a violent regime that armed to threaten the peace, that cultivated ties to terror and defied the clear demands of the United Nations Security Council. Saddam Hussein produced and possessed chemical and biological weapons and was trying to reconstitute his nuclear weapons program. He used chemical weapons in acts of murder against his own people.

The U.N. Security Council, acting on information it had acquired over many years, passed more than a dozen resolutions demanding that the dictator reveal and destroy all of his prohibited weapons. A final Security Council resolution promised serious consequences if he continued his defiance. The former dictator of Iraq chose his course of action, and for the sake of peace and security, we chose ours.

The Prime Minister and I have no greater responsibility than to protect the lives and security of the people we serve. The regime of Saddam Hussein was a grave and growing threat. Given Saddam's history of violence and aggression, it would have been reckless to place our trust in his sanity or his restraint. As long as I hold this office, I will never risk the lives of American citizens by assuming the good will of dangerous enemies.

Acting together, the United States, Great Britain, and our coalition partners enforced the demands of the world. We ended the threat from Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction. We rid the Middle East of an aggressive, destabilizing regime. We liberated nearly 25 million people from decades of oppression, and we are now helping the Iraqi people to build a free nation.

In Iraq, as elsewhere, freedom and self-government are hated and opposed by a radical and ruthless few. American, British, and other forces are facing remnants of a fallen regime and other extremists. Their attacks follow a pattern. They target progress and

success. They strike at Iraqi police officers who have been trained to enforce order. They sabotage Iraqi power grids that we're rebuilding. They are the enemies of the Iraqi people.

Defeating these terrorists is an essential commitment on the war on terror. This is a duty we accept. This is a fight we will win. We are being tested in Iraq. Our enemies are looking for signs of hesitation. They're looking for weakness. They will find none. Instead, our forces in Iraq are finding these killers and bringing them to justice.

And we will finish the task of helping Iraqis make the challenging transition to democracy. Iraq's governing council is now meeting regularly. Soon the council will nominate ministers and propose a budget. After decades of tyranny, the institutions of democracy will take time to create. America and Britain will help the Iraqi people as long as necessary. Prime Minister Blair and I have the same goal: The Government and the future of Iraq will be in the hands of the people of Iraq.

The creation of a strong and stable Iraqi democracy is not easy, but it's an essential part on the war against terror. A free Iraq will be an example to the entire Middle East, and the advance of liberty in the Middle East will undermine the ideologies of terror and hatred. It will help strengthen the security of America and Britain and many other nations.

By helping to build and secure a free Iraq, by accepting the risks and sacrifice, our men and women in uniform are protecting our own countries, and they're giving essential service in the war on terror. This is the work history has given us, and we will complete it.

We're seeing movement toward reform and freedom in other parts of the Middle East. The leadership and courage of Prime Minister Abbas and Prime Minister Sharon are giving their peoples new hope for progress. Other nations can add to the momentum of peace by fighting terror in all its forms. A Palestinian state will be built upon hope and reform, not built upon violence.

Terrorists are the chief enemies of Palestinian aspirations. The sooner terrorism is rooted out by all the governments in the region, the sooner the Palestinian flag will rise over a peaceful Palestinian state.

The spread of liberty in Afghanistan and Iraq and across the Middle East will mark a hopeful turn in the history of our time. Great Britain and America will achieve this goal together. And one of the reasons I'm confident in our success is because the character and the leadership of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Mr. Prime Minister.

Prime Minister Blair. Thank you, Mr. President. And first of all, as I did a short time ago, I would like to pay tribute to your leadership in these difficult times, because ever since September the 11th, the task of leadership has been an arduous one, and I believe that you have fulfilled it with tremendous conviction, determination, and courage.

President Bush. Thank you, sir.

Prime Minister Blair. And I think it's as well that we understand how this has all come about. It came about because we realized that there was a new source of threat and insecurity in our world that we had to counter. And as I was saying in my speech to Congress, this threat is sometimes hard for people to understand, because it's of such a different nature than the threats we have faced before, but September the 11th taught us it was real.

And when you lead countries, as we both do, and you see the potential for this threat of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction to come together, I really don't believe that any responsible leader could ignore the evidence that we see or the threat that we face. And that's why we've taken the action that we have, first in Afghanistan and now in Iraq.

And in Afghanistan, we acted to remove the Taliban, and we still pursue the Al Qaida terrorist network there and in other parts of the world. But there is no doubt at all that but for that action, Al Qaida would have retained its central place of command and control which now is denied to it.

And in respect to Iraq, we should not forget Resolution 1441 that was passed in the United Nations, in which the entire international community accepted the threat that Iraq constituted.

I think it's just worth pointing out, in these last few days, Iraq has had a governing council established, with the help of the United Nations representative Sergio de Mello, and in the last 2 weeks, the United Nations has spoken about the numbers of missing people and mass graves. And that number, just on the present count, is round about 300,000 people.

So let us be clear: We have been dealing with a situation in which the threat was very clear and the person, Saddam Hussein, wielding that threat, someone of total brutality and ruthlessness, with no compunction about killing his own people or those of another nation.

And of course, it's difficult to reconstruct Iraq. It's going to be a hard task. We never expected otherwise. But as the President has said to you a moment or two ago, the benefit of that reconstruction will be felt far beyond the territory of Iraq. It is, as I said earlier today, an indispensable part of bringing about a new settlement in the whole of the Middle East.

And I would also pay tribute to the President's leadership in the Middle East and in rekindling the prospect of the Middle East peace process. If I can remind people, I think many people were cynical as to whether this could ever be rekindled. Many people doubted whether the commitment was there, to fairness for Palestinian people as well as to the state of Israel. And yet the President has stated very clearly the goal of a two-state solution. And now we actually have the first steps, albeit tentative, towards achieving that.

And when I met Prime Minister Sharon in London a few nights ago, I was more than ever convinced that if we could provide the right framework within which these tentative steps are made, then we do genuinely have the prospect of making progress there.

And then, again, as I was saying earlier, the commitment that America has now given, that the President has given, in respect of Africa, in tackling some of the poorest parts of our world, is again a sign of hope. And all these things are changing our world. And however difficult the change may be, I genuinely believe it is change for the better.

So I am honored once again to be here in the White House with you, Mr. President. As I said earlier, we are allies, and we are friends. And I believe that the work that we are embarked upon is difficult but is essential, and so far as we are concerned, we shall hold to it, ride the way through.

President Bush. We'll take a couple of questions. Tom [Tom Raum, Associated Press].

Responsibility for the War on Terror/ Coalition in Iraq

Q. Mr. President, others in your administration have said your words on Iraq and Africa did not belong in your State of the Union Address. Will you take personal responsibility for those words? And the both of you, how is it that two major world leaders such as yourselves have had such a hard time persuading other major powers to help stabilize Iraq?

President Bush. First, I take responsibility for putting our troops into action. And I made that decision because Saddam Hussein was a threat to our security and a threat to the security of other nations.

I take responsibility for making the decision, the tough decision, to put together a coalition to remove Saddam Hussein, because the intelligence, not only our intelligence but the intelligence of this great country, made a clear and compelling case that Saddam Hussein was a threat to security and peace.

I say that because he possessed chemical weapons and biological weapons. I strongly believe he was trying to reconstitute his nuclear weapons program. And I will remind the skeptics that in 1991, it became clear that Saddam Hussein was much closer to developing a nuclear weapon than anybody ever imagined. He was a threat. I take responsibility for dealing with that threat.

We are in a war against terror, and we will continue to fight that war against terror. We're after Al Qaida, as the Prime Minister accurately noted, and we're dismantling Al Qaida. The removal of Saddam Hussein is an integral part of winning the war against terror. A free Iraq will make it much less likely that we'll find violence in that immediate neighborhood. A free Iraq will make it more likely we'll get a Middle Eastern

peace. A free Iraq will have incredible influence on the states that could potentially unleash terrorist activities on us. And yes, I take responsibility for making the decisions I made.

Q. Mr. President——

President Bush. Hold on for a second, please.

Prime Minister Blair. Sorry. First of all, before I answer the question you put to me about other countries helping us, let me just say this on the issue to do with Africa and uranium. The British intelligence that we had we believe is genuine. We stand by that intelligence. And one interesting fact I think people don't generally know, in case people should think that the whole idea of a link between Iraq and Niger was some invention, in the 1980s we know for sure that Iraq purchased round about 270 tons of uranium from Niger. So I think we should just factor that into our thinking there.

As for other countries, actually, other countries are coming in. We have with us now round about nine other countries who will be contributing or are contributing literally thousands of troops. I think I'm right in saying the Poles in their sector have somewhere in the region of 20 different countries offering support. And I have no doubt at all we will have international support in this. Indeed, to be fair, even to those countries that opposed the action, I think they recognize the huge importance of reconstructing Iraq.

And it's an interesting thing, I was at a European meeting just a couple of weeks ago, where, as you know, there were big differences between people over the issue of Iraq. And yet, I was struck by the absolutely unanimous view that whatever people felt about the conflict, it was obviously good that Saddam was out, and most people now recognize that the important thing is that we all work together to reconstruct Iraq for the better so that it is a free and stable country.

Adam [Adam Boulton, Sky News].

Guantanamo Bay Detainees/Andrew Gilligan

Q. I wonder if I could ask you both about one aspect of Iraq and freedom and justice which, as you know, is causing a great deal of concern in Britain and the British Parliament, that is, what happens now in Guantanamo Bay to the people detained there, particularly whether there's any chance that the President will return the British citizens to face British justice, as John Walker Lindh faced regular American justice?

And just on a quick point, could the Prime Minister react to the decision of the Foreign Affairs Committee tonight that the BBC reporter Andrew Gilligan is a "unsatisfactory witness"?

President Bush. You probably ought to comment on that one. [*Laughter*]

Prime Minister Blair. Can I just say to you on the first point, obviously, this is an issue that we will discuss when we begin our talks tonight, and we will put out a statement on that tomorrow for you.

President Bush. We will work with the Blair Government on this issue. And we're about to—after we finish answering your questions, we're going to go upstairs and discuss the issue.

Q. Do you have concerns they're not getting justice, the people detained there?

President Bush. No, the only thing I know for certain is that these are bad people, and we look forward to working closely with the Blair Government to deal with the issue.

Prime Minister Blair. On your other point, Adam, the issue here is very, very simple. The whole debate for weeks revolved around a claim that either I or a member of my staff had effectively inserted intelligence into the dossier we put before the British people against the wishes of the intelligence services. Now, that is a serious charge. It never was true. Everybody now knows that that charge is untrue. And all we are saying is, those who made that charge should simply accept that it is untrue. It's as simple as that.

President Bush. Patsy [Patricia Wilson], Reuters.

Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction

Q. In his speech to Congress, the Prime Minister opened the door to the possibility that you may be proved wrong about the threat from Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

President Bush. Yes.

Q. Do you agree, and does it matter whether or not you find these weapons?

President Bush. Well, you might ask the Prime Minister that. We won't be proven wrong——

Prime Minister Blair. No.

President Bush. I believe that we will find the truth. And the truth is, he was developing a program for weapons of mass destruction.

Now, you say, why didn't it happen all of a sudden? Well, there was a lot of chaos in the country, one; two, Saddam Hussein has spent over a decade hiding weapons and hiding materials; three, we're getting—we're just beginning to get some cooperation from some of the high-level officials in that administration or that regime.

But we will bring the weapons, and of course we will bring the information forward on the weapons when they find them. And that will end up—end all this speculation. I understand there has been a lot of speculation over in Great Britain—we've got a little bit of it here—about whether or not the—whether or not the actions were based upon valid information. We can debate that all day long until the truth shows up, and that's what's going to happen.

And we based our decisions on good, sound intelligence. And the—our people are going to find out the truth, and the truth will say that this intelligence was good intelligence. There's no doubt in my mind.

Prime Minister Blair. And—yes, if I can just correct you on one thing. I certainly did not say that I would be proved wrong. On the contrary, I said with every fiber of instinct and conviction, I believe that we are right. And let me just say this one other thing to you, because sometimes, again, in the debate in the past few weeks, it's as if, prior to the early part of this year, the issue of Saddam Hussein and weapons of mass destruction were some sort of unknown quantity, and on the basis of some speculative intelligence, we go off and take action.

The history of Saddam Hussein and weapons of mass destruction is a 12-year history and is a history of him using the weapons, developing the weapons, and concealing the weapons and not complying with the United Nations inspectors who were trying to shut down his programs. And I simply say, which is why I totally agree with the President, it's important we wait for the Iraq survey group to complete their work. Because the proposition that actually he was not developing such weapons and such programs rests on this rather extraordinary proposition that, having for years obstructed the United Nations inspectors and concealed his programs, having finally effectively got rid of them in December '98, he then took all the problems and sanctions and action upon himself, voluntarily destroyed them, but just didn't tell anyone. I don't think that's very likely as a proposition. I really don't.

Right, Nick.

Guantanamo Bay Detainees

Q. Nick Robinson, ITV News. Mr. President, do you realize that many people hearing you say that we know these are "bad people" in Guantanamo Bay will merely fuel their doubts that the United States regards them as innocent until proven guilty and due a fair, free, and open trial?

President Bush. Well, yes—let me just say these were illegal combatants. They were picked up off the battlefield aiding and abetting the Taliban. I'm not trying to try them in front of your cameras or in your newspaper.

But we will talk with the Prime Minister about this issue. He's asked. Prior to his arrival, he said, "I want to talk about this in a serious way. Can we work with you?" And the answer is, absolutely. I understand the issue. And we will. We'll have a very good discussion about it, right after he finishes answering this aspect of your question.

Prime Minister Blair. I just think you should realize—I mean, of course, as I said a moment or two ago, we will discuss this together, and we'll put out a statement for you tomorrow. But I think, again, it's important just to realize the context in which all this arises, without saying anything about any specific case at all. And the context was a situation in which the Al Qaida and the Taliban were operating together in Afghanistan against American and British forces. So, as I say, we will discuss this issue. We will come back to it. You will have a statement tomorrow.

But I want to say just in concluding, once again, that the conviction that this threat of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction is the security threat our world faces has never left me. It's with me now, and I believe it to be the threat that we have to take on and defeat. I really do.

President Bush. Good job. Thank you. I appreciate your coming. [*Inaudible*]

Thank you all.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 5:29 p.m. in the Cross Hall at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Cherie Blair, wife of Prime Minister Blair; former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) of the Palestinian Authority; and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel. Prime Minister Blair referred to Sergio Vieira de Mello, U.N. Special Representative for Iraq. A reporter referred to John Walker Lindh, convicted American Taliban fighter.

Statement on the Death of Celia Cruz

July 17, 2003

Celia Cruz was an international artist whose voice and talent entertained audiences around the world. Her success in the years following her departure from her beloved Cuba was a tribute to her perseverance, compassion, and love for life. Laura joins me in sending our thoughts and prayers to her family and friends.

Remarks on the HealthierUS Initiative in Dallas, Texas

July 18, 2003

Thanks a lot. Please be seated. Thanks. It is nice to be home.

I am honored to be here at Lakewest YMCA. I've got to tell you, the facility is overwhelming. It is a beautiful facility, and I appreciate so very much the hospitality and the dedicated staff here.

Listen, we're here to talk about a health care plan that makes a lot of sense. And it's a health care plan that says if you exercise and eat healthy food, you will live longer. I mean, there is a lot of talk about treating chronic diseases and finding treatments and research and development. And that's great, and the country is on the leading edge of all kinds of new discoveries. But we've already discovered what works. And what works is to encourage people to exercise on a regular basis and to eat good foods. It's called preventative medicine. An integral part of any health care plan is to encourage people to adapt the habits necessary to avoid disease in the first place. And that's what we're here to talk about, and that is what the YMCA does, and I'm grateful for that.

And there's no better place to start in encouraging healthy choices and exercise than with our children. And so Lynn and I were honored to go to the—some of these exercise classes and were pleased to see little youngsters doing jumping jacks—with enthusiasm, I might add—[*laughter*]—counting out the number of stretches.

I mean, look, the YMCA is an integral part of a healthy America by encouraging our youngsters to exercise, to have fun, to get outside, to learn to eat good foods. We're really here to thank the Y, thank the Y here in west Dallas and thank the YMCAs all across America for being an integral part of a healthy United States of America.

Ken Gladish is the president and CEO of YMCA of the entire United States. We've got the President of the United States of the Ys with us. [*Laughter*] Thank you for coming. I'm honored you're here. Gordon Echtenkamp is the president and CEO of YMCA Metropolitan Dallas. Thank you, Gordon, appreciate you being here. Jo Harris is the executive director of the Lakewest Family YMCA. Thank you, Jo, for being here.

I hope this entourage of mine didn't overstress the organization. [*Laughter*] Turns out we don't travel lightly these days. [*Laughter*] But thanks a lot to you and your staff for opening up this facility for us to discuss health.

I'm honored that the Governor is here, Governor Rick Perry. I ran as Governor; he runs as Governor. He'll be running faster than I ran as Governor, soon. But he understands what I know: There's a lot of stress in certain jobs. I guess every job could have stress to it. There's nothing like exercise to relieve the stress, and I know Rick works out