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and the courage of America, and I've been privileged to see the compassion and the character of the American people.

All the tests of the last 2½ years have come to the right nation. We're a strong country, and we use our strength to defend the peace. We're an optimistic country, confident in ourselves and in ideals bigger than ourselves. Abroad, we seek to lift whole nations by spreading freedom. At home, we seek to lift up lives by spreading opportunity to every corner of our country. This is the work that history has set before us. We welcome it. And we know that for our country and for our cause, the best days lie ahead.

Thank you for coming, and may God bless.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:12 p.m. at the St. Paul RiverCentre. In his remarks, he referred to Ben Whitney and Rudy Boschwitz, Minnesota State finance cochairmen, Bush-Cheney '04, Inc.; Patricia Awada, Minnesota State auditor; Steve Sviggum, speaker, Minnesota State house of representatives; and Dick Day, minority leader, Minnesota State senate.

Remarks at the American Legion National Convention in St. Louis, Missouri

August 26, 2003

The President. Thank you all. Thanks for that warm welcome. It is great to be here in St. Louis, Missouri, at the 85th annual convention of the American Legion. I wonder if I'm the only member here today from Post 77 in Houston, Texas.

Audience member. No. [*Laughter*]

The President. Seems like they'd have given you a better seat. [*Laughter*]

It is always an honor to be with people who have served America and who love America. When the American Legion held its first caucus in this city back in 1919, Legionnaires dedicated this organization to the service of God and country. Times change, but those are still the right priorities. On behalf of your fellow citizens, I thank the American Legion and the Ladies Auxiliary for your idealism and for your faithful service to God and country.

I'm honored to be traveling today with Secretary of Veterans Affairs Tony Principi. He served in Vietnam, and he serves his comrades in my Cabinet. He's a tireless advocate for our Nation's veterans. I want you to understand the facts of this good man's leadership. The budget for Veterans Affairs has gone up by $15 billion since I took office, a 30-percent increase. And my budget for fiscal year 2004 includes the largest discretionary increase for the Department of Veterans Affairs ever requested by a President. The Department, under Tony's lead, has made major progress in reducing the backlog of veterans' disability claims and the number of veterans waiting for health care. And we will continue to work to make sure those backlogs are eliminated.

I want to thank Ron Conley, the national commander of the American Legion, for his kind introduction and for his leadership of this distinguished group of citizens. I appreciate Senator Jim Talent and Congressman Todd Akin from the State of Missouri, who are here with us today. I thank Elsie Bailey, American Legion's lady auxiliary national president. I'm honored to be on the stage with Major General Patrick Brady, Medal of Honor recipient.

I know in the audience somewhere is my friend Arlene Howard. There she is. Arlene, thank you. I don't know if you remember the speech I gave in front of the Congress right after the attacks of September the 11th, but I held up the badge of one of the brave who were killed. It was the badge of Arlene's son. I'm honored you're here, Arlene. I appreciate you coming. I can't wait to give you a hug.

I want to thank the board of directors for the invitation. And I want to thank you all for being such great Americans. The American Legion is an effective and respected voice for the veteran, and you speak with authority. In the years following the First World War, leaders of this organization helped to establish the U.S. Veterans Bureau. Following World War II, you helped secure passage of the GI bill. You've supported the memorials to those who fought in World War II and Korea and Vietnam, so the sacrifices of those wars are always remembered.

For two generations, you have demanded a full accounting of Americans whose fate is undetermined. And my administration will

not rest until that accounting is complete. And having fought under the American flag and seen it folded and given to families of your friends, you are committed, as am I, to protecting the dignity of the flag in the Constitution of the United States.

In the 20th century, the American flag and the American uniform stood for something unique in history. This Nation gained great power, and we used that power in the service of human freedom. Americans liberated continents and concentration camps. America's Armed Forces humbled tyrants and raised up and befriended nations that once fought against us. Our Nation led a great alliance against a Communist empire until that empire was gone and its captives were free. America's veterans have all been a part of this great story of perseverance and courage, and people and nations across the world are better off because of your service.

On Memorial Day last year, I visited the military cemetery at Normandy and saw the grave of one of the founders of the American Legion, Brigadier General Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. When Roosevelt landed with the first wave of his unit on D-day, he and his men found themselves in a different part of Utah Beach from the point they expected. Roosevelt quickly sized up the situation and called in a whole division to the new sector. Turning a challenge into an advantage, he declared, ''We'll start the war from here.''

Well, a great challenge came to America on September the 11th, 2001. Enemies who plotted for years in secret carried out missions of murder on our own soil. It was a day of suffering and sorrow. It was also a day of decision for our country. As a united and resolute people, America declared, ''We'll start the war from here.''

In this first war of the 21st century, America and all free nations are facing a new threat and fighting a new enemy, a global network of terror supported by outlaw regimes. We've seen the hand of the terrorist enemy in the attacks on our country. We've seen the deadly work of the terrorists in Bali, in Mombasa, in Riyadh, in Jakarta, in Casablanca. On a single day last week, we saw the true nature of the terrorists once again. In Baghdad, they attacked a symbol of the civilized world, the United Nations headquarters, and killed men and women who were there to bring humanitarian help to the Iraqi people. They killed a respected U.N. Special Representative, Sergio Vieira de Mello from Brazil. And on the same day in Jerusalem, a terrorist murdered 21 innocent people who were riding a bus, including little children and 5 Americans.

The terrorists' aim is to spread chaos and fear by killing on an ever-widening scale. They serve their cause by sacrificing the innocent. They celebrate the murder of women and children. They attacked the civilized world because they bear a deep hatred for the values of the civilized world. They hate freedom and religious tolerance and democracy and equality for women. They hate Christians and Jews and every Muslim who does not share their narrow and violent vision.

No nation can be neutral in the struggle between civilization and chaos. Every nation that stands on the side of freedom and the value of human life must condemn terrorism and act against the few who would destroy the hopes of the many.

Because America stands for freedom and tolerance and the rights of all, the terrorists have targeted our country. During the last few decades, the terrorists grew bolder, believing if they hit America hard, America would retreat and back down. Five years ago, one of the terrorists said that an attack could make America run in less than 24 hours. They're learning something different today. The terrorists have not seen America running; they've seen America marching. They've seen the armies of liberation. They have seen the armies of liberation marching into Kabul and to Baghdad. The terrorists have seen speeding tank convoys and roaring jets and Special Forces arriving in midnight raids. And sometimes justice has found them before they could see anything coming at all.

We've adopted a new strategy for a new kind of war. We will not wait for known enemies to strike us again. We will strike them in their camps or caves or wherever they hide before they hit more of our cities and kill more of our citizens. We will do everything in our power to deny terrorists weapons of mass destruction before they can commit

murder on an unimaginable scale. The security of this Nation and our friends requires decisive action. And with a broad coalition, we're taking that action around the globe. We are on the offensive against terror, and we will stay on the offensive against terror.

In Afghanistan, we acted against the Taliban regime that harbored Al Qaida and ruled by terror. The Taliban felt pretty strong when they were whipping women in the streets and executing them in soccer fields. When our coalition moved in, the Taliban ran quickly for the caves. But the caves could not hide these killers from justice. We've sent a message that is understood throughout the world: If you harbor a terrorist, if you support a terrorist, if you feed a terrorist, you're just as guilty as the terrorists. And the Taliban found out what we meant.

Afghanistan today is a friend of the United States of America. Because we acted, that country is not a haven for terrorists and the people of America are safer from attack. That nation still faces challenges, and our coalition forces there still face dangers. Yet we're working every day to make sure that Afghanistan finds its future as a free and stable and peaceful nation.

America and the new Afghan Army are working together in a major operation called Warrior Sweep, which is hunting down terrorists one by one. NATO is now taking a leading role in keeping Afghanistan secure. New roads are being built, medical clinics are opening, and many young girls are going to school for the first time, thanks to our coalition and the United States of America.

The Al Qaida terrorists lost a base in Afghanistan, but they operate in many other places. We're on their trail, from Pakistan to the Philippines to the Horn of Africa. Earlier this month, we captured a major terrorist named Hambali. He's a known killer and was a close associate of September the 11th mastermind Khalid Sheik Mohammed. Hambali was one of the world's most lethal terrorists and is suspected of planning the attack on Bali and other recent acts of terror. We're making steady progress. Nearly two-thirds of known senior Al Qaida leaders, operational managers, and key facilitators have either been captured or killed.

Now Al Qaida is wounded, yet not destroyed. It remains a grave danger to the American people. Terrorist networks are still finding recruits and still plotting attacks and still intending to strike our country. Yet our resolve is firm, and it is clear: No matter how long it takes, we will bring to justice those who plot against America.

We've also pursued the war on terror in Iraq. America and our coalition removed a regime that built, possessed, and used weapons of mass destruction, a regime that sponsored terror, and a regime that persecuted its people. Our military coalition destroyed the Iraqi regime while taking extraordinary measures to spare innocent life. The battle of Iraq was conducted with the skill and honor of a great military, the United States Armed Forces.

Because of our military, catastrophic weapons will no longer be in the hands of a reckless, unstable dictator. Because of our military, Middle Eastern countries no longer fear subversion and attack by Saddam Hussein. Because of our military, Iraq will no longer be a source of funding for suicide bombers in the Middle East. Because of our men and women in uniform, the torture chambers in Iraq are closed, the prison cells for children are empty, and the people who speak their minds need not fear execution.

In all the debates over Iraq, we must never forget the brutal nature of the regime of Saddam Hussein. Mass grave sites, literally thousands of people buried in mass grave sites, were recently discovered by our troops. They contain the remains not only of executed men and women but of executed children as well. Our people in uniform, joined by fine allies, ended this nightmare in Iraq, removed a threat to the world, and they have made our Nation proud.

The work of our coalition in Iraq goes on because that country is now a point of testing in the war on terror. The remnants of Saddam's regime are still dangerous, and terrorists are gathering in Iraq to undermine the advance of freedom. Al Qaida and the other global terror networks recognize that the defeat of Saddam Hussein's regime is a defeat for them. They know that a democratic Iraq in the heart of the Middle East would be a further defeat for their ideology

of terror. They know that the spread of peace and hope in the Middle East would undermine the appeal of bitterness, resentment, and violence. And the more progress we make in Iraq, the more desperate the terrorists will become. Freedom is a threat to their way of life.

They have sabotaged water mains and oil pipelines and attacked local police. Last week, they killed aid workers bringing food and medicine to the country. The terrorists have killed innocent Iraqis and Americans and U.N. officials from many nations. They have declared war on the entire civilized world, and the civilized world will not be intimidated. Retreat in the face of terror would only invite further and bolder attacks. There will be no retreat.

We are on the offensive against the Saddam loyalists, the foreign fighters, and the criminal gangs that are attacking Iraqis and coalition forces. We're receiving more and more vital intelligence from Iraqi citizens, information that we're putting to good use. Our recent military operations have included almost 200 raids netting more than 1,100 detainees. Since the end of major combat operations, we have seized more than 8,200 tons of ammunition, thousands of AK–47s, and rocket-propelled grenades and other weapons.

And as we help the Iraqi people establish security, we are working through that famous deck of cards. So far, of the 55 most wanted Iraqi leaders, 42 have been captured or killed. The brutal, vicious sons of the dictator are gone. Recently, we captured the former Vice President of Iraq. He was one of Saddam Hussein's most feared enforcers. And recently, as well, we captured the man known as ''Chemical Ali.'' He earned his nickname by ordering chemical weapon attacks on whole Iraqi villages, killing thousands of citizens. ''Chemical Ali's'' savage career is over. The search goes on for other former leaders of Iraq, and we will find them. After decades of smothering fear, the Iraqi people can be certain: The regime of Saddam Hussein is gone, and it is never coming back.

Ultimately, the security of Iraq will be won by the Iraqi people themselves. They must reject terror, and they must join in their own defense. And they're stepping forward. More than 38,000 Iraqis have been hired as police officers. Iraqi police and border guards and security forces are increasingly taking on critical duties. Over 1,400 Iraqi civil defense corps volunteers are being trained to work closely with coalition forces. Twelve thousand Iraqis will be trained in the next year for the country's new army.

At the same time, 31 countries have contributed 21,000 forces to build security in Iraq. I will continue to challenge other countries to join in this important mission.

In most of Iraq today, there's steady progress toward reconstruction and civil order. Iraq's Governing Council, representing the nation's diverse groups, is steadily assuming greater responsibility over the country. The coalition provisional authority led by Ambassador Paul Bremer is implementing a comprehensive plan to ensure a successful, democratic Iraq and a better future for the Iraqi people.

Building a free and peaceful Iraq will require a substantial commitment of time and resources, and it will yield a substantially safer and more secure America and the world. I'll work with the Congress to make sure we provide the resources to do the work of freedom and security.

Iraq's progress toward self-determination and democracy brings hope to other oppressed people in the region and throughout the world. It is the rise of democracy that tyrants fear and terrorists seek to undermine. The people who yearn for liberty and opportunity in countries like Iran and throughout the Middle East are watching, and they are praying for our success in Iraq.

More progress will come in Iraq, and it will require hard and sustained efforts. As many of you saw firsthand in Germany and Japan after World War II, the transition from dictatorship to democracy is a massive undertaking. It's not an easy task. In the aftermath of World War II, that task took years, not months, to complete. And yet the effort was repaid many times over as former enemies became friends and allies and partners in keeping the peace.

Likewise, the work we do today is essential to the peace of the world and for the security of our country. America is a nation that understands its responsibilities and keeps its

word. And we will honor our word to the people of Iraq and those in the Middle East who yearn for freedom. Murderers will not determine the future of Iraq, and they will not determine the future of the Middle East.

In Jerusalem as in Baghdad, terrorists are trying to undermine the hopes of peace with acts of violence. Their desperation also grows as the parties move closer to a just settlement. But terrorists do not speak for the Palestinian people. They do not serve the Palestinian cause. And a Palestinian state will never be built on the foundation of violence.

Now is the time for every true friend of the Palestinian people, every leader in the Middle East, and the Palestinian people themselves to cut off all money and support for terrorists and actively fight terror on all fronts. Only then can Israel be secure and the flag rise over an independent Palestine. And to bring that day closer, America will be a consistent friend of all who work for peace.

For nearly 2 years, on many fronts, the United States and our friends have conducted a global campaign against terror. We met the enemy on desert sands and mountain passes, wherever they choose to gather and fight. We've had successes, yet our mission continues. The stakes could not be greater for the American people. All of us who have taken an oath to defend this Nation will do our duty.

Our military forces in the war on terror are showing the definition of ''duty.'' In hostile conditions and remote parts of the earth, brave Americans are sacrificing for freedom and the security of others. Some have been wounded, and some have been killed. The veterans in this hall understand the loss and sadness that have come to military families. This Nation is grateful to every man and woman who serves, and we honor the memory of all who have fallen.

We also remember what this fight is about. Our military is confronting terrorists in Iraq and Afghanistan and in other places so our people will not have to confront terrorist violence in New York or St. Louis or Los Angeles. Our Armed Forces are doing the work they are called to do. They're taking the fight to the enemy so that America and our friends can live in peace.

The war on terror is a test of our strength. It is a test of our perseverance, our patience, and our will. This Nation has been tested before. By the character of men and women like you, we've come through every trial. And so it is today. Our course is set. Our purpose is firm. No act of terrorists will weaken our resolve or alter their fate. Our only goal, our only option, is total victory in the war on terror. And this Nation will press on to victory.

Thank you for having me. May God bless you, and may God continue to bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3 p.m. at the St. Louis Convention Center. In his remarks, he referred to Nurjaman Riduan Isamuddin (known as Hambali), Al Qaida's chief operational planner in Southeast Asia; Khalid Sheik Mohammed, senior Al Qaida leader responsible for planning the September 11 attack, who was captured in Pakistan on March 1; former President Saddam Hussein and former Vice President Taha Yasin Ramadan of Iraq; former Iraqi Ba'ath Party official Ali Hassan al-Majid (known as ''Chemical Ali''); and L. Paul Bremer III, Presidential Envoy to Iraq. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Statement on the Report of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board

August 26, 2003

Today the Columbia Accident Investigation Board released its report on the tragic accident that claimed the lives of seven brave astronauts. These men and women assumed great risk in service to all humanity. On behalf of a grateful Nation, I once again recognize their sacrifices and those of their loved ones. Their service will never be forgotten.

Our Nation also owes its appreciation to Admiral Harold Gehman, Jr. (retired) as well as the other 12 members of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board. As Board Chair, Admiral Gehman and his team have worked tirelessly over the past seven months conducting an exhaustive review of the circumstances surrounding this accident. The next steps for NASA under Sean O'Keefe's leadership must be determined after a thorough review of the entire report, including its recommendations.