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NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 6 p.m. at Baghdad International Airport. In his remarks, he referred to Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez, USA, commander, Coalition Joint Task Force Seven; L. Paul Bremer III, Presidential Envoy to Iraq; and former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Remarks and an Exchange With Reporters Aboard Air Force One

November 27, 2003

President's Visit to Iraq

The President. I thank you for honoring the confidentiality necessary to pull this off. I made the decision to go because I wanted our troops not only that were there to have dinner but the troops in harm's way to know that their Commander in Chief and, more importantly, their country support. And I thought the best way to do that would be to spend time with them on Thanksgiving to thank them and to send a message—you know, the message I sent, which is we appreciate their sacrifices.

You know, Thanksgiving has got to be hard for young troops, to know that their families are gathered, having dinner, a turkey feast and everything. That's got to be a lonely moment for them. And I felt like at this point that it would be—hopefully, it would help them to see their President. And I recognize that I didn't see every troop in harm's way scattered throughout the region, but the word will get out, thanks to you all.

The idea first came up in mid-October. Andy said, ''Would you be interested in going to Baghdad?'' And I said, ''Yes, I would, except I don't want to go if it puts anybody in harm's way. It's very essential that I fully understand all aspects of the trip, starting with whether or not we could get in/out safely, whether or not my presence there would in any way cause the enemy to react and therefore jeopardize somebody else's life.''

I felt it was important to send a message that we care for them and we support them strongly and that we erase any doubt in their minds as to whether or not the people stand with them. You know, I understood the consequences and risks. And over time, I was assured by the planners and, as importantly, our military people and the pilot here of this airplane that the risk could be minimized if we were able to keep the trip quiet. I was fully prepared to turn this plane around.

I thought a crucial moment yesterday was when I saw you all. That's why I said, you know, no phones. A crucial moment in this trip, frankly, was in between changing planes, and I wasn't sure whether or not—and the circle is pretty tight—I wasn't sure whether or not people would be able to tell their loved ones, ''I can't see you on Thanksgiving, and I can't tell you why.'' So I was worried about that, but I was fully prepared to turn this baby around and come home.

And 3 hours out, I checked with our Secret Service, who checked with people on the ground. They assured me that it was still a tight hold on the information and that the conditions on the ground were as positive as could possibly be. I even went up to the cockpit and watched Tillman bring it in—which, had the security been broken, there would have been the time that we would have been most vulnerable. However, the plane—that's why Colonel Tillman's judgment was so important to this—this plane is protected; it's protected against the kinds of things that could be used against it. It also—we obviously flew in in the dark; precautions were taken.

At any rate, it was an emotional moment to walk in that room. The energy level was beyond belief. I mean, I've been in front of some excited crowds before, but this was—the place truly erupted, and I could see the, first, look of amazement and then look of appreciation on the kids' faces. Working the crowd, a soldier said to me, ''I'm so glad you came. Thanks for coming. It's important for us to know that the people of America support us, and the fact that the President would come confirms that in this soldier's mind.'' And I think it confirmed in a lot of soldiers' minds.

Anyway, I'd be glad to answer any questions.

Q. How'd you slip out of Crawford?

The President. ''How'd I get out of Crawford,'' was the question. The agents, the Secret Service—well, first of all, I didn't slip

out, because I had to tell my family—that would be my wife and daughters—that I would not be there for Thanksgiving today. My mother and dad came over from College Station, thinking they would see me. They did not know I was not going to be there.

So they knew—Laura knew, and the girls knew. I assured them that I wouldn't be going if it wasn't well thought out and well planned. They understood. I think the girls thought it was a great thing to do, to go see the—go thank our troops. A lot of the kids are their age, 22 years old, and younger. And Laura was pleased that I had decided to go. I comforted her about the—you know, I assured her that I wouldn't be doing this if I wasn't confident we could get in and out of there safely. That was very important.

They pulled up kind of a plain-looking vehicle with tinted windows, and I slipped on a baseball cap and pulled her down, as did Condi. We looked like a normal couple. [*Laughter*]

Q. On your way to the Wal-Mart. [*Laughter*]

The President. To buy some Berkeley Power worms. [*Laughter*]

Q. Pulling a bass boat behind you? [*Laughter*]

The President. Yes, exactly. [*Laughter*] We encountered some traffic. I–35, as you know, if you're a Texan—well, you know. Anyway, Thanksgiving traffic, a lot of people heading up to Dallas, so we were about, I guess, 10 minutes late to the plane. But he kept moving. There were plenty of vehicles out there; there just were. There were people out there.

Then we got here, to TSTC. They had a bunch of people go in the front, and I came up the back.

Q. The footman's entrance.

The President. The footman's entrance. Glad to know how the people live. [*Laughter*]

Q. Well, do you think Americans mind that you just slipped——

The President. I think Americans understand that we've got a bunch of kids in harm's way and that the President, if it can be done safely, owes an explanation of thanks and thanksgiving to these kids. Had I not been convinced it could be done and done properly, I wouldn't have gone. I think Americans also understand that, had we announced this, had I gone in to thank our troops with the flurry of announcement and all the analysts talking about it ahead of time, it would have put me in harm's way, and it would have put others in harm's way, including yourselves.

So I think the American people appreciate me going to express their sentiments to these kids. These people are sacrificing for our freedom and our peace. We are at war with terror, and we are in the process of changing Iraq, which will make America more secure, and Americans appreciate that a lot.

Meeting With Members of Iraq's Governing Council

Q. Mr. President, we were told you got to see Mr. Chalabi today?

The President. I did see Chalabi. I met with—well, let's see, I had the dinner. You saw that. I wasn't sure how long you were there. You probably timed it, but an hour or so—are these the times? Oh, these are the people there.

I shook a lot of hands, saw a lot of kids, took a lot of pictures, served a lot of food, and we moved on to see four members of the Governing Council—the names are here. Talabani is the head of it right now, so he was the main spokesman. But Chalabi was there, as was Dr. Khuzai, who had come to the Oval Office—I don't know if you all were in the pool that day, but she was there—she was there with him and one other fellow, and I had a good talk with them.

We were there for about maybe a little less than 30 minutes. I was able to assure them that we were going to stay the course and get the job done, but I also reminded them what I said publicly, that it's up to them to seize the moment, to have a Government that recognizes all rights, the rights of the majority and the rights of the minority, to speak to the aspirations and hopes of the Iraqi people. I assured them that I believe in the future of Iraq, because I believe in the capacity of the people to govern—as I said, govern wisely and justly. I meant what I said. I told them that privately. I told them I back Jerry Bremer 100 percent. He's got my full confidence. He was sitting right there as well. We had a nice visit.

They assured me that they were making good progress, that the Iraqi people are overwhelmingly pleased that Saddam is gone, that they do see a bright future, and they want us to—they want to work with us.

Q. What do you make of what some of the ayatollahs have said lately about the need to have elections sooner and some of the concerns they've expressed about the process?

The President. Well, I think that—as I explained to these Governing Council members, to get where they need to be is going to require debate and discussion, and that's healthy. You know, the fact that there are different opinions being discussed is positive. It's a positive sign that things are different inside of Iraq.

It took us a while to get from the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution. So we've got to be realistic and patient about how they proceed. I think the game plan they've got now in place is a good plan. The Governing Council came up with the plan. I supported it. We discussed the overarching flaw that they're discussing. They understand the basic—the notion of human rights and the dignity of each person. I'm confident they'll get to where they've got to be.

President's Visit to Iraq

Q. Was there any point along in the planning for this trip that you looked at it and thought, you know, this might be too risky, maybe we should——

The President. Yes, all along. I mean, I was the biggest skeptic of all.

Chief of Staff Andrew H. Card. Yes, he was. [*Laughter*]

The President. Our planners worked hard to answer every question, and I had a lot of questions. John Abizaid, who I just spoke to by phone, thanking him for the trip—he chose not to come here because he wanted to be with his troops. And I understand that and appreciate that. But he was a very enthusiastic backer of this idea. But I also made sure that people interfacing with Abizaid knew that at any time he wanted us to pull out, I would do so. It was very important for John Abizaid and Jerry Bremer to be comfortable—John—Sanchez, General Sanchez, to be comfortable with this trip. And they were comfortable all the way through.

I think we addressed every issue. Hagin is the point man in the administration for this. He did a fabulous job of addressing the details. I sat down with Colonel Tillman on one of our trips recently and just said, "Look, I need to know, what does it take to get into Baghdad now, and how risky is it?" And he said, "Sir, I wouldn't take you in there if I wasn't convinced that we could do this in a way that would safely bring you to the troops."

I wouldn't have asked you to come if I didn't think it was safe. I would not have put you in this position.

Q. Was there a moment when you thought it wasn't going to happen——

The President. No, no. It was moving all along, but I was pretty tough. In Vegas, I called in and still had more questions about how this was going to happen. Andy was there, and I was pushing hard. Yesterday I sat down on CIVITS out of Crawford with Condi and Andy and the Vice President, went around one more time just to make sure everybody knew all the details. People knew different aspects of it, but these three knew all the details and were confident that it was the right thing to do.

It is the right thing to do. Having seen the reaction of those troops, you know it was the right thing to do, and the word will get out. And their parents will appreciate it, and their loved ones will appreciate it. I went over there to thank them and not only thank them but to remind them our country stands with them and that we will stay the course until the job is done.

I met with—then we went from the Governing Council—I met with the key generals and colonels, the commanders in the field. They reported to me that we're on the offensive, that we're using the tools necessary to suppress the handful of the killers, and we're making good progress, and that the spirit of the troops is high; they understand the mission and the goal. And I was pleased to be able to talk with these men and women as well. It's an important moment. They needed to see me. They needed to see—because they don't read—they don't get to see me all the time. Sometimes they read things. And they

got to see me. They saw my determination and my support and respect for what they're doing.

Meeting With Baghdad Area Leaders

Communications Director Dan Bartlett. You might want to remind them about the Baghdad officials.

The President. What?

Director Bartlett. Two Baghdad officials.

The President. Oh, met the chiefs—head of the—two council members, the chief of the council and one of his compatriots—Baghdad. Bremer tells me crime in Baghdad is down by something like 38 percent. The chairman was very positive and optimistic and very thankful, by the way. To a person, the Iraqi leadership I met with are incredibly thankful and generous with their praise of what America has done for them.

But that was a good meeting. It was getting down to the grassroots level, to—you've seen me enough to know when I see these mayors, I tease them about filling the potholes. That's what—you know, they've got a job to do, and they're doing it. I didn't say, ''Fill the potholes,'' by the way. [*Laughter*] But I did encourage them, to let them know that we have confidence in their ability to self-govern, and we respect their culture, and we want to help them.

President's Visit to Iraq

Q. Did you tell any Members of Congress that you were going to make——

The President. Do what now?

Q. Did you inform any Members of Congress or anything?

The President. No.

Q. We're still a little unclear about when you told the First Lady.

The President. Oh. Well, I told her that—she knew all along—actually, I didn't mean Laura and the girls. I meant the girls. Laura knew from—we first started talking about this seriously on the trip to Asia. She was on the trip. I said, ''Look, I'm thinking about going to Baghdad.'' And as the planning got more and more in place, I informed her more and more in place—that it was more and more in place. I was more and more comfortable.

And she asked me yesterday morning, am I going? I said, ''Yes, I'm going.'' And so I told her yesterday—she knew I was going, or planning on going, because I told you I'd pull the plug if I needed to. And I said, ''It looks like we're on.'' And then the girls came up from Austin in the afternoon, and that's when I told Barbara and Jenna, with Laura there, that I was going to Baghdad.

Q. Mr. President, you talked about talking to the generals and the colonels and about the more aggressive stance they've taken recently. You know, Secretary Rumsfeld said recently it's hard to get a grasp for whether or not we're making progress. Did you get a sense of what they're doing and how we can actually measure whether or not we're making headway?

The President. Well, one way you measure is how many people you bring to justice. And they feel like they're making good progress. You can measure based upon feedback from the ground. That's what they get. And that's—they're upbeat. They just said, ''Mr. President, we'll stay the—you stay the course. We'll succeed.'' And my message was, ''I know you'll succeed, and I'm here to tell you we're going to stay the course.''

And I asked the General Sanchez about the recruitment of Iraqi citizens into these different security elements. He said, ''It's strong. Training is going well.'' The Iraqi people and the Governing Council all thought the same. They want to be on the frontline of their own security, and that's a positive development. And so I was pleased with the report.

Personal Aide Blake Gottesman. Thank you, everyone.

The President. Good job.

Q. What kind of ball cap was it? What did it say on it?

National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice. Mine was in my bag, it was——

Q. A Cleveland Browns hat?

Q. It was actually—I didn't have a Cleveland Browns hat.

Q. That would have been a dead giveaway.

Dr. Rice. That would have been a dead giveaway.

The President. Here are the names of the people here.

Q. We would love to get some video of you up here sometime, sir.

Q. What does it say, Blake?

The President. ——something like this.

Q. Did you really pull it down that low?

The President. No. We had pretty tinted windows. We went through a gate where——

Q. They thought, ''Who in the world is that?''

The President. Eddie said, ''We're coming to a gate.''

Q. [*Inaudible*]

The President. Well, I'm telling you, this is—again, had this been jeopardized in any way, we wouldn't put myself and/or you all in this position. And we were very—we were cautious, and we needed to be. And I want to thank you for honoring that. This is an historic trip. And it'll reverberate in such positive ways for these kids who are—and these soldiers who are far away from home serving us. And it's exactly what I wanted to do.

Q. Thank you.

Historic Presidential Visits to Combat Areas

Q. Did you look back at any precedents of any other President's trips?

The President. There is no precedent in the war on terror. This is the first war of the 21st century, unique in its nature. But I don't know. I guess you all need to do that. I don't know whether or not—I think Lyndon Johnson went as a Vice President or as President. I don't know.

Q. He was in Asia, and he made an unscheduled trip.

The President. Into Vietnam as President?

Q. Eisenhower went to Korea as a——

The President. Franklin Roosevelt went to north Africa, but the front was in Tunisia, I think, but maybe not.

Q. Abraham Lincoln went to Richmond a couple of days after——

The President. He sure did. I got the picture of the White House of the—Lincoln with his generals and Admiral Porter talking about the peace. I think that's what you're talking about.

Q. But he was mobbed by people when he went to—this was a couple of days after he fell.

The President. Right. And he was on a boat outside of Richmond, unfortunately called ''The Peacemakers.'' It had a wonderful rainbow behind he and his generals. That's where he's talking about making sure the peace was fair and generous so that the United States would stay united.

And, interestingly enough, the original is in the—upstairs in the Treaty Room in the White House. And it is in the Pentagon as well, a copy of it, which I found to be very—so I remember going into the Pentagon and—somebody took—[*laughter*].

But thanks for honoring it.

Q. I appreciate it.

The President. You're a credit to your Nation, a credit to your profession.

NOTE: The President spoke aboard Air Force One en route to Andrews Air Force Base following his departure from Baghdad at approximately 8 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Col. Mark Tillman, USAF, commander, Presidential Airlift Group; Ahmad Chalabi, Jalal Talabani, and Raja Habib al-Khuzai, members, Iraqi Governing Council; L. Paul Bremer III, Presidential Envoy to Iraq; former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; Gen. John P. Abizaid, USA, combatant commander, U.S. Central Command; Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez, USA, commander, Coalition Joint Task Force Seven; and Joe Hagin, Assistant to the President and White House Deputy Chief of Staff. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Digest of Other White House Announcements

The following list includes the President's public schedule and other items of general interest announced by the Office of the Press Secretary and not included elsewhere in this issue.

November 22

In the morning, the President had an intelligence briefing.