

Office of the Press Secretary on February 18. In his remarks, the President referred to Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia; King Abdullah II of Jordan; King Mohamed VI of Morocco; former Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) of the Palestinian Authority; Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel; Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority; former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraqi Shiite leader; President Bashar al-Asad of Syria; and Col. Muammar Abu Minyar al-Qadhafi, leader of Libya. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

### **Letter to Congressional Leaders Transmitting a Report on Iraq**

*February 17, 2004*

*Dear Mr. Speaker: (Dear Mr. President:)*

Consistent with the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq Resolution of 2002 (Public Law 107-243), the Authorization for the Use of Force Against Iraq Resolution (Public Law 102-1), and in order to keep the Congress fully informed, I am providing a report prepared by my Administration. This report includes matters relating to post-liberation Iraq under section 7 of the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 (Public Law 105-338).

Sincerely,

**George W. Bush**

NOTE: Identical letters were sent to J. Dennis Hastert, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Richard B. Cheney, President of the Senate. This letter was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on February 18. An original was not available for verification of the content of this letter.

### **Remarks Prior to Discussions With President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and an Exchange With Reporters**

*February 18, 2004*

**President Bush.** A couple statements, and I'm going to answer a couple of questions afterwards.

Mr. President, welcome. I'm glad you're here in the Oval Office. Thank you for your

friendship. I'm looking forward to a good discussion.

I want to thank you for working with the United States in the war on terror. I want to thank you for your understanding for the need for Iraq to be democratic and free. I appreciate the fact that you've got an education system that is modern and viable, that women in your country are given equal rights. I look forward to talking to you about the need to have a press corps that is vibrant and free as well as an open political process. There's a lot we can talk about. Tunisia can help lead the greater Middle East to reform and freedom, something that I know is necessary for peace for the long term.

So welcome.

**President Ben Ali.** Mr. President, thank you for very much for this opportunity. I am delighted to be here in the United States, and thank you very much for your generous invitation.

As you know, the Tunisian-U.S. relationships have been always unique and ancient. They go back for two centuries. Mr. President, we also look forward to increasing and cementing those relationships between the two countries in all spheres and every area, in order to continue to support the friendship between the two peoples and between the two countries.

We share principles together, Mr. President, and that is the establishment of states on the basis of democracy, human rights, and combating terror. We believe that Tunisia is an ally of the United States and the relationships between the two countries has strategic dimension.

And I would like to take this opportunity to thank the friendly American people who stood by us during our liberation and after our independence. Thank you very much.

**President Bush.** A couple of questions. Scott [Scott Lindlaw, Associated Press].

### **Same-Sex Marriage**

**Q.** Thanks, Mr. President. More than 3,000 same-sex couples have taken vows since San Francisco started issuing marriage licenses to gays and lesbians. This Massachusetts court ruling could result in the first legally recognized gay marriages in May. Do

these developments make you any more inclined to endorse a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage?

**President Bush.** I strongly believe that marriage should be defined as between a man and a woman. I am troubled by activist judges who are defining marriage. I have watched carefully what's happened in San Francisco, where licenses were being issued even though the law states otherwise. I have consistently stated that if—I'll support law to protect marriage between a man and a woman. And obviously these events are influencing my decision.

**Q.** Are you close to a decision?

**President Bush.** I'm watching very carefully. But I'm troubled by what I've seen. People need to be involved with this decision. Marriage ought to be defined by the people, not by the courts. And I'm watching it carefully.

Stevie [Steve Holland, Reuters].

### **National Economy**

**Q.** Mr. President, do you think the economy is strong enough to produce 2.6 million jobs this year, as your economic report projected?

**President Bush.** I think the economy is growing, and I think it's going to get stronger. I do think there are some things we need to do. We need to make sure the tax cuts are permanent. I look forward to continuing to talk about this issue. Uncertainty in the Tax Code could affect small-business planning. Uncertainty in the Tax Code will make it harder for our citizens to make rational decisions about spending money. We need to have an energy policy, open up markets for trade. We need less regulation. We need tort reform. There are things we can do to make sure the economy grows.

I'm pleased by the fact that since August there's been 366,000 new jobs, in one survey. There was another survey called the Household Account that's been more optimistic. But I'm mindful there are still people looking for work, and we've got to continue building on the progress we've made so far.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:32 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.

### **Remarks Following a Discussion on the National Economy**

*February 19, 2004*

**The President.** Thanks for coming. I want to thank the folks who have joined me here on the stage. We've just had a chat about their personal circumstances, and I'll share some of their stories with you.

We were talking about our economy and the hopes of families, how to keep the entrepreneurial spirit strong in America. I hope I conveyed to them my sense of optimism about the future of the country. After all, I've seen firsthand what we've been through, and we've been through a lot. And in spite of that, our economy is strong, and it's getting stronger. There's still room for improvement.

Let me walk you through right quick of what these families and small-business owners and large business and CEOs have dealt with, what the country has dealt with in the last 3 years. First, the economy began to slow down in March of 2000. The stock market started to go down. That affected people's savings. And if you watch your savings accounts go down, it tends to have a negative effect on people's attitudes.

Then the country got into—went into a recession, early of 2001. Recession means that people's incomes, at the employer level, are going down, basically, relative to costs, people are getting laid off. It's a slowdown. It's a time of—it's a tough time for risktakers. It's a very tough time for workers. A lot of industries felt like they needed to lay off people, which created uncertainty.

And then on September the 11th, the country got attacked, a vicious attack by brutal killers that affected the Nation's psychology. It affected how I view the world, by the way. When we see gathering threats, the country now must take them very seriously. We can't let threats become imminent. We can't trust madmen with the security of the American people.

September the 11th attacks hurt the economy. We began to recover. I mean, this is a strong nation. The entrepreneurial spirit is really strong. You might remember the attitude after September the 11th: No terrorist is going to hold this country down or hold us back. I saw that spirit firsthand when I