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Q. Well, you deliver a lot of speeches, and a lot of them contain similar phrases, and they vary very little from one to the next. And they often include a pretty upbeat assessment of how things are going, with the exception of tonight's pretty somber assessment, this evening.

The President. It's a pretty somber assessment today, Don, yes.

Q. I guess I just wonder if you feel that you have failed in any way? You don't have many of these press conferences, where you engage in this kind of exchange. Have you failed in any way to really make the case to the American public?

The President. I guess if you put it into a political context, that's the kind of thing the voters will decide next November. That's what elections are about. They'll take a look at me and my opponent and say, "Let's see, which one of them can better win the war on terror? Who best can see to it that Iraq emerges as a free society?"

Don, if I tried to fine-tune my messages based upon polls, I think I'd be pretty ineffective. I know I would be disappointed in myself. I hope today you've got a sense of my conviction about what we're doing. If you don't, maybe I need to learn to communicate better.

I feel strongly about what we're doing. I feel strongly that the course this administration has taken will make America more secure and the world more free and, therefore, the world more peaceful. It's a conviction that's deep in my soul. And I will say it as best as I possibly can to the American people.

I look forward to the debate and the campaign. I look forward to helping—for the American people to hear what is a proper use of American power. Do we have an obligation to lead, or should we shirk responsibility? That's how I view this debate. And I look forward to making it, Don. I'll do it the best I possibly can. I'll give it the best shot. I'll speak as plainly as I can.

One thing is for certain, though, about me—and the world has learned this—when I say something, I mean it. And the credibility of the United States is incredibly important for keeping world peace and freedom.

Thank you all very much.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 8:31 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; Muqtada Al Sadr, Iraqi Shiite cleric whose militia engaged in an uprising in Iraq in early April; Lakhdar Brahimi, Special Adviser to the U.N. Secretary-General; Gen. John P. Abizaid, USA, combatant commander, U.S. Central Command; Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez, USA, commander, Coalition Joint Task Force Seven; Thomas J. Pickard, former Acting Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation; Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi of Italy; President Aleksander Kwasniewski of Poland; Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom; Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi of Japan; Chairman Kim Chong-il of North Korea; Col. Muammar Abu Minyar al-Qadhafi, leader of Libya; A.Q. Khan, former head of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program; and professional baseball player Sammy Sosa. The President also referred to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (9/11 Commission); and the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction (Silberman/Robb Commission).

The President's News Conference With Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel

April 14, 2004

President Bush. I'm pleased to welcome Prime Minister Sharon back to the White House. For more than 50 years, Israel has been a vital ally and a true friend of America. I've been proud to call the Prime Minister my friend. I really appreciate our discussions today. The policy of the United States is to help bring peace to the Middle East and to hope—bring hope to the people of that region.

On June 24, 2002, I laid out a vision to make this goal a reality. We then drafted the roadmap as the route to get us there. The heart of this vision is the responsibility of all parties—of Israel, of the Palestinian people, of the Arab states—to fight terror, to embrace democracy and reform, and to take the necessary steps for peace.

Today, the Prime Minister told me of his decision to take such a step. Israel plans to remove certain military installations and all settlements from Gaza and certain military

installations and settlements from the West Bank. These are historic and courageous actions. If all parties choose to embrace this moment, they can open the door to progress and put an end to one of the world's longest-running conflicts.

Success will require the active efforts of many nations. Two days ago, I held important discussions with President Mubarak of Egypt, and I will soon meet with King Abdullah of Jordan. We're consulting closely with other key leaders in the region, in Europe, and with our Quartet partners, the EU, Russia, and the United Nations. These steps can open the door to progress toward a peaceful, democratic, viable Palestinian state. Working together, we can help build democratic Palestinian institutions as well as strong capabilities dedicated to fighting terror so that the Palestinian people can meet their obligations under the roadmap on the path to peace.

This opportunity holds great promise for the Palestinian people to build a modern economy that will lift millions out of poverty, create the institutions and habits of liberty, and renounce the terror and violence that impede their aspirations and take a terrible toll on innocent life. The Palestinian people must insist on change and on a leadership that is committed to reform and progress and peace. We will help, but the most difficult work is theirs.

The United States is strongly committed, and I am strongly committed, to the security of Israel as a vibrant Jewish state. I reiterate our steadfast commitment to Israel's security and to preserving and strengthening Israel's self-defense capability, including its right to defend itself against terror.

The barrier being erected by Israel as a part of that security effort should, as your Government has stated, be a security, rather than political, barrier. It should be temporary rather than permanent, and therefore not prejudice any final status issues, including final borders. And its route should take into account, consistent with security needs, its impact on Palestinians not engaged in terrorist activities.

In an exchange of letters today and in a statement I will release later today, I'm repeating to the Prime Minister my commitment to Israel's security. The United States will not prejudice the outcome of final status negotiations. That matter is for the parties. But the realities on the ground and in the region have changed greatly over the last several decades, and any final settlement must take into account those realities and be agreeable to the parties.

The goal of two independent states has repeatedly been recognized in international resolutions and agreements, and it remains the key to resolving this conflict. The United States is strongly committed to Israel's security and well-being as a Jewish state. It seems clear that an agreed, just, fair, and realistic framework for a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue, as part of any final status agreement, will need to be found through the establishment of a Palestinian state and the settling of Palestinian refugees there, rather than Israel.

As part of a final peace settlement, Israel must have secure and recognized borders which should emerge from negotiations between the parties, in accordance with U.N. Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949, and all previous efforts to negotiate a two-state solution have reached the same conclusion. It is realistic to expect that any final status agreement will only be achieved on the basis of mutually agreed changes that reflect these realities.

I commend Prime Minister Sharon for his bold and courageous decision to withdraw from Gaza and parts of the West Bank. I call on the Palestinians and their Arab neighbors to match that boldness and that courage. All of us must show the wisdom and the will to bring lasting peace to that region.

Mr. Prime Minister, welcome to the White House.

Prime Minister Sharon. Thank you. Thank you so much. I want to thank you, Mr. President, for your warm welcome and your strong support and friendship for the state of Israel.

I came to you from a peaceseeking country. Despite the repeated terror attacks

against us, the people of Israel continues to wish for the achievement of a viable peace in accordance with our Jewish tradition as outlined by Israel's prophets. Our people desires to be known for its achievements in the fields of culture, science, and technology, rather than in the battlefield. We are committed to make any effort to develop our country and society for our own benefit and for the benefit of the peoples of the region.

In our meeting today, I presented to you the outlines of my disengagement plan. It will improve Israel's security and economy and will reduce friction and tension between Israelis and Palestinians. My plan will create a new and better reality for the state of Israel, and it also has the potential to create the right conditions to resume negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

I was encouraged by your positive response and your support for my plan. In that context, you handed me a letter that includes very important statement regarding Israel's security and its well-being as a Jewish state. You have proven, Mr. President, your ongoing, deep, and sincere friendship to the state of Israel and to the Jewish people. I believe that my plan can be an important contribution to advancing your vision, which is the only viable way to achieve the peace and security in the Middle East.

I wish to end with a personal note. I, myself, have been fighting terror for many years and understand the threats and cost from terrorism. In all these years, I have never met a leader as committed as you are, Mr. President, to the struggle for freedom and the need to confront terrorism wherever it exists. I want to express my appreciation to you for your courageous leadership in the war against global terror and your commitment and vision to bring peace to the Middle East.

Thank you, Mr. President.

President Bush. Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister. Good job, good job.

Prime Minister Sharon. Thank you.

President Bush. We will answer two questions a side, starting with the American side. The Prime Minister will call on somebody from the Israeli press at the appropriate moment.

Prime Minister Sharon. If there will be any, there's no——

President Bush. There may not be any questions from the Israeli press, that's what you're saying? [*Laughter*] It's not the case from the American press.

Terry Hunt [Terence Hunt, Associated Press].

Israeli West Bank Settlements/Final Status Negotiations

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. I'd like to go back to your opening statement and ask you, does the United States recognize Israel's right to retain some Jewish settlements in the West Bank? And if so, how does that fit with the U.S. policy that settlements are an obstacle to peace?

President Bush. First, let us recognize that the Prime Minister has made the decision to dismantle some settlements. In other words, he is beginning to implement a vision that allows for contiguous territories so that a Palestinian state can emerge.

And this is an important step today. It accelerates the process. See, I view it as creating an opportunity, an opportunity for those of us who believe that a Palestinian state should emerge, a peaceful Palestinian state, to work to put a framework for such a state to exist so that the institutions of such state are bigger than the people. See, when you have a Government where the person is bigger than the institutions, that Government will inevitably fail. It's when the institutions are bigger than the people that you're able to have continuity and people's hopes and aspirations realized and peace.

It is very important for a Palestinian state to emerge in which we have confidence, in which any Prime Minister of Israel has confidence, in which the United States has confidence, that will be a peaceful partner. And so what the Prime Minister has done is he started the process of removing settlements from the West Bank.

Your question to me is about the final status agreements. I said that the conditions on the ground have changed over time, and obviously, that must be recognized during any final status negotiations.

You know, I look forward to the moment when we're actually discussing final status negotiations. There's a lot of work to be done prior to getting there. And what the Prime

Minister has done is started the process. And now it's up for responsible Palestinians, caring Europeans, Americans, the United Nations to step in and help develop such a state that will be a peaceful state, one in which money will actually end up helping the people of the Palestinian—Palestinians to be able to grow their businesses and grow their—find wealth for their families. And then we can worry about the final status negotiations. In other words, there's a lot of work to do. What the Prime Minister has done is started the work, and we're prepared to help with the work.

Prime Minister Sharon. Thank you. The same question for me?

President Bush. Right over here.

Prime Minister Sharon. Oh, there's another question?

President Bush. You ask for one of the Israeli press. You don't have to answer their questions if you don't want to. [*Laughter*] I'm sorry, you didn't ask him one. No, it's too late. I'm protecting my friend here from the appetite of the American press.

Prime Minister Sharon. I'm afraid we have the same problem. [*Laughter*]

President Bush. It's not a problem, it's an opportunity, Mr. Prime Minister. [*Laughter*] Go ahead and ask a question from your press corps.

Prime Minister Sharon. Thank you.

Q. Mr. President, may I ask a question, please?

President Bush. It's up to the Prime Minister, but if it was up to me, of course you can.

Q. I would like to ask you, please, first.

President Bush. Please, what is it?

Prime Minister's Leadership

Q. Sharon's political future depends largely on the Americans quid pro quo, so still I'm asking on this issue, could you clarify the ambiguity surrounding few key issues, as the settlements, for example. In your eyes, Ariel is going to be on the Israeli side of the fence. I wanted to ask about the right of return, but your answer was quite clear there.

[*At this point, the journalist continued in Hebrew, and no translation was provided.*]

President Bush. Let me say this to you, his future doesn't depend upon me. His future depends upon his capacity to convince the Israeli people he's doing the right thing, and I think he is. He's a bold leader. That's what people want. They want leadership.

There is a process that got stuck, and the Prime Minister steps up and leads. And I'm confident the Israeli people appreciate that kind of leadership.

You can answer the question if you care to, but I don't buy the premise that what I say helps him get elected. What he says helps him get elected. It's his vision of Israel that the people of Israel will be looking toward.

Prime Minister Sharon. Thank you. First, I will answer in Hebrew.

[*Prime Minister Sharon answered in Hebrew and then continued in English.*]

The question was, did I take a risky decision. So my answer is that when the issue is the security of the state of Israel, which I am fully responsible to, and political and economic future of the state of Israel, I believe that personal issues like personal security is not to be taken in consideration. This is not the issue.

And I would say that what I have learned from my visit here, that the plan, disengagement plan, contributes to the security of Israel, contributes to the political situation of Israel in the world, and helps our economy. Therefore, I think that those questions of personal risk has not been taken into consideration. We have to look into the interests of the state of Israel.

President Bush. Caren [Caren Bohan, Reuters].

Q. Thank you, sir——

President Bush. Trudy [Trudy Feldman, Trans Features], I'm sorry. I've got to call on the wire services. I'm sorry.

Thrust of U.S. Policy/Responsibilities of Participants

Q. Former President Jimmy Carter said last week that he feels U.S. Middle East policy is tilted too much toward Israel. Is that a fair criticism?

President Bush. U.S. Middle East policy is tilted toward peace, and the best way to

achieve peace is to fight terror. And I'm the first American President ever to have articulated the creation of a Palestinian state. And the reason I did so is because I believe a Palestinian state, when properly done, will be—provide enough hope for people, provide a peaceful avenue for those who aspire for a better future. And I also believe it's in Israel's interest that there be a Palestinian state which develops in a peaceful way.

Every statement I've said, I said all parties must assume responsibilities. The Palestinians have got to assume the responsibility of fighting off terror. If they want a state which provides a hopeful future for their people, they must fight terror. They must be resolute in the fighting of terror.

Israel has responsibilities. Today the Prime Minister stepped up to those responsibilities. He started a process that I believe can be a hopeful process. The Arab world has got responsibilities to help not only fight terror but to provide hope for a peaceful Palestinian people. Those are responsibilities. America is assuming responsibilities. My position on Middle East peace is quite clear.

Final question, from the Israeli press.

Palestinian Right of Return/Israeli Security

[*A journalist asked a question in Hebrew and then continued in English.*]

Q. And Mr. President, if I may, is what you said about the Palestinian refugee mean that you deny unconditionally the—what's it called—the right of return of Palestinian refugee to the state of Israel?

President Bush. My statement—refer back to my statement that I said, and also look at the letter that I sent the Prime Minister. It will clarify my position on the issue.

[*Prime Minister Sharon answered in Hebrew and then continued in English.*]

Prime Minister Sharon. I mentioned first that I got from you, Mr. President, a letter. And I sent you a letter. And in these letters, all those issues, all those details are very clearly described in those letters. And I suggested also on your behalf that they will read the letters.

President Bush. Thank you.

Prime Minister Sharon. That's the first thing. I was asked by the Israeli media if I would say the things they held here or we discussed here or have been concluded here will provide me a weapon against my colleagues in the Government or the members of my party in Israel.

So my answer was that I was never looking for weapons to use against my colleagues in the Government or against the members of my party. I agree that I've been using weapons for many years, being a soldier for many years, against the enemies of the state of Israel. And I never hesitated, and I will not hesitate also in the future, to use weapons if it will be needed in order to defend the citizens of Israel, their life, their normal life, their development, and so on.

And therefore, I say that I don't need for that. I believe that our discussion today providing the needed security and hope for the future of the state of Israel and the future, I would say, of the region.

President Bush. Thank you, sir.

Prime Minister Sharon. Thank you.

President Bush. Thank you all very much.

Prime Minister Sharon. Thank you so much.

President Bush. Welcome.

Prime Minister Sharon. Thank you.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 1:05 p.m. in the Cross Hall at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt; and King Abdullah II of Jordan.

Statement on the Israeli Disengagement Plan and the Middle East Peace Process

April 14, 2004

I remain hopeful and determined to find a way forward toward a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

The Israeli Plan:

I welcome the disengagement plan prepared by the Government of Israel, under which Israel would withdraw certain military installations and all settlements from Gaza, and withdraw certain military installations and settlements in the West Bank. These