

motives. Yet, who can doubt that Iraq is better for being free from one of the most bloodiest tyrants the world has ever known? Millions of Iraqis are grateful for the chance they have been given to live in freedom, a chance made possible by the courage and sacrifice of the United States military.

We have great respect for the people of Iraq and for all Arab peoples, respect for their culture and for their history and for the contribution they can make to the world. We believe that democracy will allow these gifts to flourish, that freedom is the answer to hopelessness and terror, that a free Iraq will lead the way to a new and better Middle East, and that a free Iraq will make our country more secure.

I understand the difficulty of the mission of our men and women in uniform. They're facing an enemy in sand and heat and blasting winds, often unable to tell friend from foe. I know how painful it is to see a small number dishonor the honorable cause in which so many are sacrificing. What took place in the Iraqi prison does not reflect the character of the more than 200,000 military personnel who have served in Iraq since the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

All Americans know the goodness and the character of the United States Armed Forces. No military in the history of the world has fought so hard and so often for the freedom of others. Today, our soldiers and sailors and airmen and marines are keeping terrorists across the world on the run. They're helping the people of Afghanistan and Iraq build democratic societies. They're defending America with unselfish courage. And these achievements have brought pride and credit to this Nation.

I want our men and women in uniform to know that America is proud of you and that I'm honored to be your Commander in Chief.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:55 a.m. at the Pentagon. In his remarks, he referred to former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; Adnan al-Zurufi, Governor of the Najaf province in Iraq; and Lakhdar Brahimi, Special Adviser to the U.N. Secretary-General.

Interview With American Forces Radio and Television Service

May 10, 2004

Pentagon Meeting

Q. Thanks for doing this, sir. Let's start with why you're at the Pentagon. You just met with your national security team and some top military officials, and you talked about the progress we've made in Iraq. Can you outline that for me, please?

The President. Sure. First, we got rid of Saddam Hussein. That in itself was tremendous progress for the people of Iraq. He was a tyrant. We discovered mass graves, torture rooms. I mean, this is a fellow who, you know, if you didn't agree with him politically, your life was in jeopardy. And as a result of getting rid of Saddam Hussein, the people of Iraq now have a chance to live in freedom.

Secondly, we have been on the offense against foreign fighters and former Saddam loyalists and the illegal militias that really are doing everything they can to stop freedom. These people can't stand the thought of a free society. A free society will be a defeat to their ideologies or way of thinking or their desires. And our military has performed brilliantly, and I got a briefing on the progress being made around parts of Iraq.

Thirdly, we're making progress in heading toward a transfer date of sovereignty. What that means is that at some point in time—not "some point"—on June 30th, a new Government will be stood up and they will be, then, responsible for making decisions that will benefit the Iraqi people. Of course, we will stay to help make sure the security situation will then be such that then they'll be able to have free elections.

One of the things we got briefed on today from General Abizaid and General Petraeus is that we are continuing to work with the Iraqis to develop a security—Iraqi security force, different elements of a security force, to fight off these terrorists and criminals, for that matter, and people coming into the country illegally—or people trying to blow up infrastructure. And that's been steady. Progress is steady. You've just got to understand, these people have come from a world in which a tyrant really ruled their life. And

so they're beginning to develop the habits and the confidence that free people will have.

What's very important—there's two things that are important: One, our troops have got to know we're doing the right thing, and by sacrificing the way they are in Iraq, they're really making this country more secure and free; and secondly, the Iraqi people must know that I will not back off in the face of these terrorist attacks. I will remain steadfast and strong in the mission, because it's the right thing to do.

President's Reaction to Prisoner Abuse

Q. Let's talk about that mission for just a second. Some things have started to overshadow our mission there, some of the real disturbing photos that we've seen. How do we set that aside and continue what we need to do?

The President. Well, I think there will be a focus here in America on pictures and, you know, what you've seen. And the way you handle that is you just tell the truth, which stands in stark contrast to societies run by tyrants. Look, the world will see that the American people are disgusted by the behavior of a very few people. The troops need to hear from me that I understand that those over there in the Iraqi theater are good, decent, honorable citizens who are not only fighting the bad guys but are making life better for the innocent people of Iraq. And there's thousands of acts of kindness that take place every day, and I know it.

The world will also see that we handled the situation in a way that is open and transparent. In other words, people will be able to see the process and that justice will be done. It is very essential that as we—that as justice is done, that we honor the presumption of innocence and the rule of law. There are certain standards of law that free societies adhere to, but we will get to the bottom of this.

In the meantime, as I mentioned today to some people here in the Pentagon, we stay focused on the mission. We must not be diverted. We will find the truth. We'll make sure the truth comes out, and we'll make sure the system works well. But we must not lose our focus. And I told that to General Abizaid as well. We must stay—we must stay totally

focused on what's taking place in Iraq, because a free Iraq is in this Nation's long-term interest.

See, free societies are peaceful societies. And we're in a part of the world right now where there hasn't been much freedom, and as a result, people lose a sense of hope, and they become violent, and they fall prey to false ideologies that then encourage killing of innocent life. And the long-term security of this Nation depends on our ability to stay focused on the mission in Iraq, because a free Iraq will be a major change agent in the Middle East.

Q. Sir, you touched on it a little bit. You and I both know that that's a small part of the military, a very small part, and the rest of us aren't representative of that.

The President. Right.

Q. You're our Commander in Chief. Now is your opportunity to talk to the rest of us. What would you like to say to the rest of us regarding—

The President. Sergeant Lehman, I'll tell you, the actions of a few will not be allowed to stain the honor of the mighty United States military. Not only do I know how hard our troops are fighting in Iraq and how brave our troops are; I also know how decent and compassionate our troops are. I hear stories all the time of people working with orphans or people helping schools be formed or people working to provide medical care for people.

I mean, people in Iraq who have interface with our troops, the innocent Iraqis who have, know how decent and compassionate these folks are. We've sent the finest from our country overseas, and I want our troops to know that. And the American people know that; that's what's important. Our troops need to know the American people stand squarely behind them.

Military Appreciation Month

Q. May is Military Appreciation Month. What can the United States and its citizens do to help show our troops their appreciation?

The President. Make sure your pay is good, make sure that the base housing works well, make sure that when a troop gets wounded overseas that they get the best care

at Walter Reed or Bethesda in a quick period of time, make sure you get the best equipment possible, make sure that there's a firm financial commitment behind the men and women who wear our uniform as well as to thank a member or the military.

In my State of the Union, I read a letter from a little girl that I thought was a very touching letter, where she was writing about the need to thank somebody in uniform. Well, that's what Americans can do. I'm telling you, I've been out there. I get out of Washington, and I see the people, and I hear the—in every speech I give I praise the United States military—speeches I've been giving recently, like last week, I praised the United States military for courage and strength and sacrifice. And the response is overwhelming. The American people believe in our military personnel, and our troops need to know that.

President's Visits With Wounded Troops

Q. When you've gotten out, you've had a chance to visit some of our forward-deployed troops. You've been to Walter Reed—

The President. Right.

Q. —and you've visited some of those who have come back. What strikes you about the military members that you talk to?

The President. I think that—a couple of things. One, the wounded want to get back in their unit, which is remarkable to hear. You walk in, a fellow has been—I remember going to Fort Hood over Easter. And Laura and I went in a fellow's room, and they had been in a fight in Sadr City. And he said, "Look, I just want to get out of here and get back to my unit." I meet people who understand the mission and who believe that what we're doing is the right thing, because they see on the ground the realities on the ground, and they see progress that is being made. Sure, there's a lot of tough fighting, but in parts of the country, a civil society is beginning to grow and develop.

I had—one of the most poignant meetings came with a young guy I met who had lost his leg in Afghanistan, and I went in there—part of my mission is to tell him, we care for you a lot, and just let him know that the Commander in Chief appreciates their sacrifice. And he lost his leg, and I told him,

I said, "When you get out of here, you're going to get the best prosthesis possible, and then you're going to come to the White House and run with me." The guy had kind of a glazed look, you know, "Sure, another political promise that won't be met."

And sure enough, he got rehab. I kept checking on him through a colonel I knew who was in charge of physical therapy at Walter Reed, and she one day came in and said, "Well, Mr. President, he's ready to run." I said, "I'm not so sure I am. I hurt my knee." [Laughter] Anyway, we go over to the South Lawn of the White House, and he came up from Louisiana, and it was a touching moment for me. It just—it reminded me of how courageous our people are. This kid came out of the bed rehabbed, and he was running with the President—outran me too, I want to tell you.

Families of the Military

Q. That was my next question. [Laughter] It's hard to talk about the sacrifices of military members without talking about their families as well. What would you like to say about that?

The President. Well, obviously the first families that I want to talk about are those who have lost a loved one. I think it's very important for them to know the United States Government, along with our military, will complete the mission. In other words, I've assured people that they will not have died in vain. And the mission is a free Iraq. A free Iraq is in our Nation's interest because it will help us become more secure. But a free Iraq will also be a part of an historic opportunity to change the world to be more peaceful.

Secondly, I know there's a lot of loved ones who are, obviously, worried. And my message to them is, we're making sure they get everything they need, and that the—we spent time today talking about troop protection. These generals understand the need for troop protection. These are capable guys that are smart, that know what they're doing, and they care as much as anybody cares to make sure our troops have the best and that they're well protected.

Third, my message to the families is, is that there's a lot of people praying for you and

for your loved ones. And I hope it sustains them during these lonely moments, to be held up in prayer by fellow citizens. There's a lot of prayer warriors across America who pray daily for the safety of the troops and for the peace of mind for the families.

Q. Do you think that families understand the mission just as much as the military members?

The President. I do—I do. I think they hear from their loved ones. The first mission is to make sure that we never forget the lessons of September the 11th. We're at war. I think most family members understand we're at war. Family members understand their loved one volunteered for the mission. Not one person in combat today that didn't say, "I want to defend my country, voluntarily. I'll go into the theater. If sent, I'll go." And family members understand that.

There's obviously—look, there's apprehension and nervousness. And one of the things that we must do is make, as best as possible, certain the tours of duty so there's not anxiety amongst family members. However, when General Abizaid says he needs to slow down the rotation in order for there to be more troops on the ground, he'll get that from me and from the Secretary of Defense because we support our generals on the ground, which means we support our troops on the ground, so they can have what is necessary to win this—win this war. And we're going to win it, see? That's what people have got to understand. It's tough at times, but we're winning. And what matters is determination and will and steadfast leadership from the United States.

And you know, the Iraqis are sitting there watching this election process of ours. It's an important process, obviously. Democracy is essential, in my judgment, for a peaceful world, and we're the leading democracy on the face of the Earth.

But as they watch this, they're wondering whether or not I've got what it takes to stand up to the political pressures and do what I think is right, which is follow through with our strategy to win this war and make sure they're free. They've got to hear this, and our troops must hear this. I don't care what the politics are like in America. We're doing the right thing, and we will—we will finish

the task, because I understand how important the task is for the future of this country.

Changing Situation in Iraq

Q. We've talked about the progress toward that task, and things have changed a little bit because they've been making progress on their own, politically, and some of the volatility that has surfaced. How has our mission changed toward that task recently?

The President. Remember, things have changed on the ground too, because we're bringing people to justice. I mean, our troops are successful. They're running raids in different cities when they find people showing up who wants to—who want to stop progress. The people in the military watching this need to know that we're on the offense. And one of the reasons why things have quieted down recently is there's fewer of them to make noise, fewer of the enemy to make noise.

But what is changing is the fact that we're heading toward a moment of transfer of sovereignty. And the Iraqis are going to have to then be responsible, at some point in time, and the transfer of sovereignty is that point in time—that they are going to have to say, "Now is the time to clean up this mess, and oh, by the way, we'd like some help." And up to now, it's been a—they've been very dependent on us. But that is beginning to change. And that's what you're beginning to see, change on the ground. That's why General Petraeus' mission is so important, to be able to provide training for these troops and to make sure there's a command structure so that Iraqi citizens are responding to Iraqi commands and needs.

And we'll have a role, don't get me wrong. I mean, we will be there after the transfer of sovereignty, because there's still going to be need for us to help protect—protect infrastructure, protect these killers [sic]. The other thing that—this is an enemy that is resourceful, and they're coldblooded. They don't care who they kill. We do. We care a lot about human life, but they don't. And they will destroy women and children in order to create fear. And the presence of our great military will help alleviate any fear that they may try to cause.

Terrorist Attacks

Q. We still hear about terrorist attacks, not only there but other parts of the world. What message do you have for the people who are perhaps still afraid of terrorist attacks?

The President. We're vulnerable, because, again, we're facing an enemy that doesn't mind walking into a subway in Madrid and putting bombs on trains where innocent commuters are sitting. And therefore, so long as they're out there, we're vulnerable. We have to be correct 100 percent of time in protecting America, and they've got to be right one time about hurting us. And so the citizens need to know we're doing everything we can to better share intelligence and safeguard our ports and borders and make sure people take their shoes off when they get on the airplanes and everything we can to secure the country.

But they also need to know, at least in my judgment, the best way to protect the homeland is to stay on the offense, give our military every tool we need, give our intelligence service the tools necessary to find these people and to get them and to stay after them and not relent and not yield. There's pressures in the world of people—the natural tendency for people is to say, “Oh, let's lay down our arms.”

But you can't negotiate with these people. There are no negotiations that are to be had. Therapy won't work. The only way to deal with them is to stay on the offense, and that's precisely what the Government will do so long as I am the Commander in Chief, because our most solemn duty and the solemn duty of people who wear the uniform of the United States is to protect the American people from harm. And I can't tell you how much I appreciate the sacrifice of those who are willing to do so.

President's Thanks to the Troops

Q. Please, just, sir, one final word for the military members that you're talking to out there.

The President. My final word is, I'm proud of our United States military, and it is a high honor to be the Commander in Chief of such a fine group of men and women.

Q. Thanks so much for joining us, sir.

The President. You bet.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 12:10 p.m. at the Pentagon for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; Gen. John P. Abizaid, USA, combatant commander, U.S. Central Command; Maj. Gen. David H. Petraeus, USA, incoming chief, Office of Security Transition-Iraq. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Remarks Honoring the 2004 Super Bowl Champion New England Patriots

May 10, 2004

The President. Thank you all for coming. Please be seated. Welcome back. The mighty New England Pats have returned, just like he told me they would. It's such an honor to welcome the team back here. I'm especially glad to see Tom Brady. I'm trying to figure out what it's like to be around a real celebrity. [Laughter]

Bob Kraft is a owner who knows how to win. And congratulations on winning the Super Bowl. What I appreciate is the fact that in the contracts you sign with the players that you include a commitment to participate in at least 10 public service events each year. I appreciate the commitment. I also appreciate the players' commitment as well.

You've got a great head coach, obviously. You can't win Super Bowls 66 percent of the time in a 3-year period unless you've got a great coach. Congratulations.

I want to congratulate all the players who are here. For those of you who weren't here 2 years ago, this is a pretty cool place to come. I want to congratulate the people who work to make a team go well, the trainers and the person—the equipment personnel, the people who never get the—who never get heralded. I understand it's—the players, obviously, are the ones that make it happen, but there are a lot of people behind the scenes that have worked long and hard to support these guys. And I want to congratulate you as well.

I appreciate Sununu, the Senator from New Hampshire. He's a huge fan of the team, as is Ed Markey and Jim McGovern,