

Remarks to Reporters at Fort Hood, Texas

March 27, 2005

I want to wish all the fellow citizens and their families a happy Easter. We prayed for peace. We prayed for our soldiers and their families. It's an honor to be here at Fort Hood to celebrate Easter with those who wear the Nation's uniform.

We wish you all a happy Easter too. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:53 a.m. at the 4th Infantry Division Memorial Chapel. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks on Freedom and Democracy in Iraq

March 29, 2005

Thank you all. Thank you. Good morning. Welcome to the White House. Please be seated. Senator Warner, it's good to see you, sir. Thank you for coming. I appreciate citizens from Iraq who have joined us. I appreciate my fellow citizens who have joined us. Thanks for coming.

Before I talk about Iraq, I do want to say that on behalf of the American people, Laura and I offer our condolences to the victims of yesterday's earthquake in Indonesia. This earthquake has claimed lives and destroyed buildings in a part of Indonesia that is only now beginning to recover from the destruction caused by the tsunami 3 months ago. Our officials have offered initial assistance and are moving quickly to gather information to determine what additional relief is needed.

I appreciate Andrew Natsios of USAID being with us today, and I know he and his team are ready to respond, to help. People of Indonesia can know as well that they have our prayers and that our Government is ready to assist.

Just a few minutes ago I met with a group of people dedicated to building a new Iraq. Most of them were born in Iraq. They come from different backgrounds. They practice different religions. They have one thing in common: They all voted in the January elections.

We're also joined today by Iraqi law students visiting the United States for an international competition, by members of Iraq's religious communities in town to learn about democracy, and by others who helped organize the—Iraq's elections held in the United States. I want to welcome you all. I want to thank you for your strong belief in democracy and freedom. It's a belief that with their vote, the Iraqi people signalled to the world that they intend to claim their liberty and build a future of freedom for their country. And it was a powerful signal.

I commend the more than 8 million Iraqis who defied the car bombers and assassins to vote that day. I appreciate the determination of the Iraqi electoral workers who withstood threats and intimidation to make a transparent election possible. I salute the courageous Iraqi security forces who risked their lives to protect voters.

By electing 275 men and women to the Transitional National Assembly, the Iraqi people took another bold step toward self-government. Today Iraqis took another step on the road to a free society when the Assembly held its second meeting. We expect a new Government will be chosen soon and that the Assembly will vote to confirm it. We look forward to working with the Government that emerges from this process. We're confident that this new Government will be inclusive, will respect human rights, and will uphold fundamental freedoms for all Iraqis.

We have seen many encouraging signs in Iraq. The world has watched Iraqi women vote in enormous numbers. The world has seen more than 80 women take their seats as elected representatives in the new Assembly. We've also seen the beginnings of a new national dialog, as leaders who did well in the last election have reached out to Sunnis who did not participate.

In a democracy, the Government must uphold the will of the majority while respecting the rights of minorities. And Iraq's new leaders are determined that the Government of a free Iraq will be representative of their country's diverse population. The new Transitional National Assembly includes people and parties with differing visions for the future of their country. In a democratic Iraq, these differences will be resolved through

debate and persuasion instead of force and intimidation.

In forming their new Government, the Iraqis have shown that the spirit of compromise has survived more than three decades of dictatorship. They will need that spirit in the weeks and months ahead as they continue the hard work of building their democracy. After choosing the leaders of their new Government, the next step will be the drafting of a new constitution for a free and democratic Iraq. In October, that document is scheduled to be put before the Iraqi people in a national referendum. Once the new constitution is approved, Iraqis will return to the polls to elect a permanent constitutional Government.

This democracy will need defending. And Iraqi security forces are taking on greater responsibility in the fight against the insurgents and terrorists. Today, more than 145,000 Iraqis have been trained and are serving courageously across Iraq. In recent weeks, they've taken the lead in offensive operations in places like Baghdad and Samara and Mosul. We will continue to train Iraqis so they can take responsibility for the security of their country, and then our forces will come home with the honor they've earned.

Iraqis are taking big steps on a long journey of freedom. A free society requires more than free elections; it also requires free institutions, a vibrant civil society, rule of law, anticorruption, and the habits of liberty built over generations. By claiming their own freedom, the Iraqis are transforming the region, and they're doing it by example and inspiration rather than by conquest and domination. The free people of Iraq are now doing what Saddam Hussein never could—making Iraq a positive example for the entire Middle East.

Today, people in a long-troubled part of the world are standing up for their freedom. In the last few months, we've witnessed successful elections in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Palestinian Territories; peaceful demonstrations on the streets of Beirut; and steps toward democratic reform in places like Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The trend is clear: Freedom is on the march. Freedom is the birthright and deep desire of every human soul, and spreading freedom's blessings is the call-

ing of our time. And when freedom and democracy take root in the Middle East, America and the world will be safer and more peaceful.

I want to thank you all for coming. We ask for God's blessings on the brave souls of Iraq, and God continue to bless the American people. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:25 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Interview With WHO Radio in Cedar Rapids, Iowa

March 30, 2005

Social Security

Jan Mickelson. The President probably wants to get in on this conversation. [Laughter] It's an honor seeing you again, sir.

The President. How are you doing?

Mr. Mickelson. I'm doing great. You realize what a risk you've done, latching on to this Social Security thing? You put our number one Senator at grave risk. [Laughter] He had to burn his AARP card. [Laughter] Do you realize what a cheap buzzard that guy is? [Laughter]

The President. No, I remember the ads with the lawnmower. [Laughter]

Mr. Mickelson. Well, see, he can't use his AARP discount anywhere anymore. He had to burn that card.

The President. Well, you know, I appreciate the chairman. He's got some political courage, which is necessary to take on tough problems. It's pretty easy to ignore problems in politics. What's hard is to take on a tough problem. And both Senator Grassley and I have dedicated ourselves to taking on the tough problem of Social Security, and it is a problem.

Mr. Mickelson. I was also warned by the Secret Service to keep the microphone away from you in a diner situation—[laughter]—because you have a karaoke gland that breaks out into Alan Jackson songs at the drop of a hat. Try to restrain yourself this morning, sir. [Laughter]