

Prime Minister's view and advice on dealing with this issue.

Prime Minister Rudd. Paul Bongiorno.

Australia's Role in Iraq/War on Terror Strategy

Q. Paul Bongiorno with Ten News—Mr. President, as you noted, Australia will begin withdrawing 500 combat troops from southern Iraq. And I heard that you accept this decision, which did, as you say, play out in our election. But how does it fit with your view, expressed quite strongly again yesterday, that to withdraw troops at this time would be to retreat?

And you've described our former Prime Minister as a man of steel. I'm wondering how you'd describe Mr. Rudd.

President Bush. Fine lad; fine lad.

First of all, I didn't exactly say that. And by the way, we are withdrawing troops. It's called return on success. And our intention is to have pulled down five battalions by July. Troops are coming out—five brigades, excuse me—troops are coming out because we're successful. And so I would view the Australia decision as return on success—returning home on success.

That's fundamentally different from saying, well, it's just too hard; pull them all out. That sends a different signal. This is a signal in which we're working collaboratively with the Iraqi Government. They know our intentions, and they know we're not going to leave them.

In the very same speech, I talked about developing a long-term strategic relationship with Iraq as well. And for those who didn't listen to the full speech, I will remind you that it's in our interests that we enter into such an arrangement. But a long-term strategic arrangement does not commit any future President to any troop level, nor does it talk about permanent bases. But it does talk about a joint strategic relationship to make sure that the Iraqi people know and the Iraqi Government knows that we're not going to leave them in the lurch.

And so we are taking troops out, just like the Australians are, because we're being successful. And his question—Steven Lee's question was, well, are you going to bring any further out? Not, are you going to bring

any out; are you going to bring any further troops out from that which we committed to do earlier? And the answer is, it depends on what our commanders say and the folks in Washington say, and it depends upon conditions on the ground. His real question was, have the conditions changed such that you believe your commander is going to make a different recommendation than he might have two days ago? And I can't answer that question. I can only tell you what I'm going to do after we get back from NATO.

Thank you for coming. I've enjoyed it.

Q. [*Inaudible*]

President Bush. Yes. Heck, yes. [*Laughter*] Thanks for coming.

Prime Minister Rudd. Good. [*Inaudible*]

President Bush. Appreciate you coming.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 11:37 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Therese Rudd, wife of Prime Minister Rudd; President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan; Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki of Iraq; Iraqi Shiite cleric Muqtada Al Sadr; Gen. David H. Petraeus, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq; Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama of Tibet; and President Hu Jintao of China. A reporter referred to former Prime Minister John Howard of Australia.

Remarks Following a Tour of Novadebt in Freehold, New Jersey March 28, 2008

The President. Thank you very much. I really want to thank Congressman Chris Smith and Vito Fossella for joining me here in Freehold, New Jersey. I'm here at a company called Novadebt. And I really appreciate Joel Greenberg and Jill Feldman for giving me an opportunity to come to this center, this company and talk with people whose lives are being positively affected as a result of a significant counseling effort to help people stay in their homes. And I really do want to thank you all for your hospitality.

During my tour, I have met with skilled professionals who provide free mortgage counseling for struggling homeowners. And the reason why I'm here is because we have got a issue in housing in America. The value of the houses have gone down in some areas,

and people's mortgages are resetting. In other words, the interest rates are going up. And that has caused a consternation and concern and care. A lot of families are facing the frightening prospect of foreclosures. Foreclosures obviously place a terrible burden on a family, as well as they lead to losses for lenders and investors. And this affects our entire economy.

We have a role to play at the Government level, and that is to help lenders and borrowers work together to avoid foreclosure. There's some homeowners who have made responsible buying decisions and who could keep their homes with just a little help—some information and some help. And so to help them, in October, my administration helped bring together a private sector group of lenders, loan servicers, investors, mortgage counselors, which is called the HOPE NOW Alliance. And the members of this group have made some progress. First of all, they agreed to industry-wide standards to streamline the process for refinancing and modifying certain mortgages. HOPE NOW also runs a national hotline to connect struggling homeowners with mortgage counselors just like the folks here at Novadebt.

I also have been—met with some homeowners who've got help. Danny Cerchiaro is with us from Iselin, New Jersey. Thank you for being here, Danny. He owns a home that also serves as a studio for his movie production business. Danny and his wife learned their adjustable-rate mortgage was resetting to a higher rate this past summer, and he became concerned about financial stability. He was worried about staying in his home. He needed a place for his business, and he needed a place to sleep. And he became concerned about whether or not he could afford it.

He got—he called HOPE NOW, and he became working with a mortgage counselor named Penny Meredith. Penny is here. Appreciate you coming, Penny. And in less than 2 months later, Penny helped Danny get a more affordable fixed-rate mortgage. Danny calls Penny, and I quote, the “magic lady.” She helped him a lot.

And there's a lot of other Americans who can get the same kind of help. One of the reasons I've come today is to say to people

who are worried about staying in their home, there is help available.

I also want to thank Theresa Torres from Kansas City who is with us. She got really worried. She's a mom of three. Her husband is a subcontractor. And she was very worried about staying in her home. And the family fell behind on their mortgage payments in December. But fortunately, she knew to call and to get help, and in this case, from Novadebt. They helped her modify her mortgage. And today, as a result of the help she received, she no longer worries about losing her home. And I thought her statement was pretty interesting. She said: “I see my role today to serve as an example for people in a similar situation.” So, Theresa, we're glad you're here.

There are hundreds of thousands of homeowners like Theresa and Danny who can benefit from calling HOPE NOW. And so one of my purposes is to make it clear there is a place where you can get counseling. And I want my fellow citizens, if you're worried about your home, to call this number: 1-88-995-HOPE. Let me repeat that again: 1-88-995-HOPE.

HOPE NOW can help homeowners find the right solution. By the way, we've got more work to do in Washington, and one of the things we can do is make sure the Federal Housing Administration gets the reforms it needs. And there's a program called FHASecure, which has given FHA greater flexibility to offer struggling homeowners with otherwise good credit histories a chance to refinance. This program is very helpful. It's, so far, helped 130,000 families refinance their mortgages. And by the end of the year, we expect the program to have reached 300,000 families.

And this is a good start. We want to help people. We're committed to helping our fellow citizens. And I fully understand, as do most Americans, that the housing market problems are complicated, and there's no easy solutions. But in the stories I've heard today, I've seen how Americans are responding with compassion and determination. We will support them with good policies. We will help responsible homeowners weather a difficult period. And in so doing, we will strengthen the dream of homeownership.

Thank you all very much.

Danny Cerchiaro. [*Inaudible*]

The President. One, eight, eight, eight—good. Is it two eights or three eights? Okay.

Danny just told me I got to get the number right—1-888-995-HOPE.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:30 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Joel Greenberg, president and chief executive officer, and Jill Feldman, vice president, Novadebt. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Proclamation 8228—To Modify the Harmonized Tariff Schedule of the United States and For Other Purposes

March 28, 2008

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

1. Section 1205(a) of the Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988 (the “1988 Act”) (19 U.S.C. 3005(a)) directs the United States International Trade Commission (the “Commission”) to keep the Harmonized Tariff Schedule of the United States (HTS) under continuous review and periodically to recommend to the President such modifications to the HTS as the Commission considers necessary or appropriate to accomplish the purposes set forth in that subsection. In 2006, the Commission recommended modifications to the HTS pursuant to section 1205 of the 1988 Act to conform the HTS to amendments made to the International Convention on the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System (the “Convention”). In Presidential Proclamation 8097 of December 29, 2006, I modified the HTS pursuant to section 1206(a) of the 1988 Act (19 U.S.C. 3006(a)) to conform the HTS to the Convention.

2. The Commission has recommended further modifications to the HTS pursuant to sections 1205(a) and (d) of the 1988 Act (19 U.S.C. 3005(a) and (d)) to alleviate unnecessary administrative burdens, and to ensure that the prior modifications proclaimed in

Proclamation 8097 maintain substantial rate neutrality.

3. Section 1206(a) of the 1988 Act authorizes the President to proclaim modifications to the HTS based on the recommendations of the Commission under section 1205 of the 1988 Act, if he determines that the modifications are in conformity with United States obligations under the Convention and do not run counter to the national economic interest of the United States. I have determined that the modifications to the HTS proclaimed in this proclamation pursuant to section 1206(a) of the 1988 Act are in conformity with United States obligations under the Convention and do not run counter to the national economic interest of the United States.

4. Presidential Proclamation 7746 of December 30, 2003, implemented the United States-Chile Free Trade Agreement with respect to the United States, and Presidential Proclamation 7747 of December 30, 2003, implemented the United States-Singapore Free Trade Agreement with respect to the United States. In Presidential Proclamation 8097, I proclaimed modifications to the HTS that I determined were necessary or appropriate to continue to carry out the duty reductions proclaimed in Proclamations 7746 and 7747.

5. In Presidential Proclamation 8214 of December 27, 2007, I further modified the HTS pursuant to section 1206(a) of the 1988 Act to ensure the continuation of tariff and certain other treatment accorded originating goods under tariff categories modified in Proclamation 8097 and to carry out the duty reductions proclaimed in Proclamations 7746 and 7747. Technical rectifications to the HTS are required to provide the intended tariff treatment.

6. On August 5, 2004, the United States entered into the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) with Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. The Congress approved the CAFTA-DR in section 101(a) of the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement Implementation Act (the “CAFTA-DR Act”) (19 U.S.C. 4011).