

chairman, Gov. Tom Carper of Delaware, vice chairman, and Raymond C. Scheppach, executive director, National Governors' Association; Gov. Lawton Chiles of Florida; United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan; Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom; President Boris Yeltsin of Russia; President Jacques Chirac of France; Gov. James B. Hunt, Jr., of North Caro-

lina; former President Ronald Reagan; former Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell; Gov. Zell Miller of Georgia; and Gov. John Engler of Michigan. The President also referred to the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB); the Education Flexibility (Ed-Flex) Partnership Demonstration Program; and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA).

Remarks on United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan's Mission to Iraq and an Exchange With Reporters *February 23, 1998*

The President. Good afternoon. Let me say first that I welcome U.N. Secretary-General Annan's mission to Baghdad. I thank him and his team for their hard work on behalf of the international community. I also want to commend each and every one of our men and women in uniform and our coalition partners for their steadfastness. Once again, we have seen that diplomacy must be backed by strength and resolve.

The Government of Iraq has made a written commitment to provide immediate, unrestricted, unconditional access for the UNSCOM weapons inspectors to all suspect sites in Iraq, as called for by the United Nations Security Council resolutions. If fully implemented—and that is the big “if”—this commitment will allow UNSCOM to fulfill its mission: first, to find and destroy all of Iraq's chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons; second, to find and destroy the missiles to deliver those weapons; and third, to institute a system for long-term monitoring to make sure Iraq does not build more.

The Secretary-General has made clear that Iraq's commitment applies to all sites anywhere in the country, including eight so-called presidential sites, which are among the areas to which the weapons inspectors had previously been denied access.

Senior diplomats appointed by the Secretary-General will accompany the UNSCOM experts as they inspect these sites, with repeat visits and no deadlines to complete their work. And Iraq has committed that all other areas, facilities, equipment, records, and means of transportation shall be open to UNSCOM under existing pro-

cedures. Again, this includes sites that were previously closed.

There are issues that still need to be clarified to our satisfaction and details that need to be spelled out. We will hear from the Secretary-General tomorrow on these questions, and we will work with him and with UNSCOM to make sure the inspections are rigorous and professional. What really matters is Iraq's compliance, not its stated commitments; not what Iraq says, but what it does. In the days and weeks ahead, UNSCOM must test and verify.

After two crises in the last 4 months, Iraq's failure to allow UNSCOM to do its job would be a serious, serious matter. If Iraq fails to comply this time to provide immediate, unrestricted, unconditional access to the weapons inspectors, there will be serious consequences.

I have ordered our military to remain in the Persian Gulf. Our soldiers, our ships, our planes will stay there in force until we are satisfied that Iran is complying—Iraq is complying with its commitments.

If the inspectors are allowed to inspect where and when they want, then they are the most effective tool we have to monitor Iraq's compliance with the commitment it made at the end of the Gulf war to give up all of its biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons, the missiles to deliver them, and the capacity to rebuild its arsenal.

I hope today's agreement will prove to be the step forward we have been looking for. But the proof is in the testing. The United States remains resolved and ready to secure, by whatever means necessary, Iraq's full compliance

with its commitment to destroy its weapons of mass destruction.

Thank you.

Q. Mr. President, what makes you think that you will be—you won't be in this position a year from now, 2 years from now, 3 years from now? What in the preliminary details makes you comfortable, or at least somewhat comfortable at this stage?

The President. Well, I've already said I don't know whether we'll be in a position of breach by Iraq within a year. All I said is that I think it is now clear, based on my conversations with Prime Minister Blair, President Chirac, President Yeltsin, and what we in our own team believe, no one seriously believes that there can be a breach of this agreement by Iraq without serious consequences.

But I will say, this is the first time—at least since 1991—that Iraq has made a commitment to unconditional, open, unfettered access to all the sites, not only these presidential sites there's been so much talk about but also some other so-called sensitive sites that have been off limits.

So if the inspection system is allowed to go forward—we know from the record that the UNSCOM inspectors have compiled in the last 7 years that the system works. And if we can find a peaceful means for the system to work to secure the safety of the people in the region, the neighbors of Iraq and others that might be menaced in the future by its weapons of mass destruction, that is what we have been seeking.

Q. Mr. President, if Iraq does not keep its word this time, do we go through this exercise of weeks and weeks and weeks again?

The President. I believe if it does not keep its word this time, everyone would understand that then the United States and hopefully all of our allies would have the unilateral right to respond at a time, place, and manner of our own choosing. And I think that's enough for me to say about that at this time.

Q. Mr. President, you said before that he's lied, and he's cheated. Do you think that you can trust him this time? What's your expectation? I know that you say you're going to take a wait and see attitude.

The President. First of all, that is true. But I've also said before that when the UNSCOM inspectors have been allowed to do their job, even when there's been some cat-and-mouse games over there, they have succeeded beyond

anyone's expectations. You just have to look at the volume of stuff they've uncovered and destroyed to know that. Therefore, this should not be a question of trust. First, we need clarity. We need to clarify some of the remaining questions about the agreement to our satisfaction. Clarity is important. And in fairness, all parties, even Saddam Hussein, all the parties are entitled to that—clarity. Then we need to test the agreement and verify that the commitments which are made in writing are kept in fact. So trust should not have to be an issue here. If you have clarity, then you can verify.

So over the next 2 days we have a very—all Americans should have a positive reaction to the fact that we finally have a commitment to open all these sites and to let the inspectors finish their job. We need clarity; we need verification; and I intend to keep our forces at high levels of preparation in the Gulf in the near-term to see what happens in terms of honoring these obligations.

Yes.

Q. Mr. President, Senator Lott says you lack a long-term strategy for handling Iraq. How do you respond to that, sir?

The President. Well, since 1991, our strategy has been to keep the sanctions on, keep Iraq from rebuilding its military might and threatening its neighbors, but to pursue this inspection system to end what is the biggest threat both to its neighbors and to others by indirection, which is the chemical, the biological, and the nuclear weapons program. That has been our strategy all along. Whether that should continue to be our strategy depends in no small measure, I believe, on whether this agreement is honored.

Q. Sir, is there any wiggle room—

Q. Has Saddam capitulated, sir?

The President. I'll answer both questions.

Q. Has Saddam Hussein capitulated?

The President. Well, I think he has admitted that he has to honor commitments he made back in '91. You know, I think that our tough response was essential to getting him to admit that. The Secretary-General has conducted a hard mission. I am satisfied that he has done the best he can. And I am satisfied that we would not have this commitment to open all these spots had not the United States and our allies—and there were lots of them, don't forget—been prepared to go further and to take whatever actions were necessary.

But the main thing we need to do now is to focus on clarifying the details of the agreement to our satisfaction, then going ahead and testing it and verifying the commitment. I think that is the most useful thing. What we want here is to secure the safety of the people who would be exposed to chemical and biological weapons and to whatever nuclear capacity that he might still have.

You know, the United States—I think I should point this out, it's not been part of my statement, but the United States—and Ambassador Richardson was there carrying the ball for us—we strongly supported expanding the program under Resolution 986 in the Security Council to let Iraq sell even more oil to go for food, to lift the Iraqi children above the minimum caloric requirement for all growing children in the world, to build 5,000 more schools, to put a lot more medicine into that country, to rebuild the water and sewer systems and the agriculture system. We care a lot about the people of Iraq, and we want them to have a decent life. But we all—we must still be vigilant and steadfast about this regime.

This is—and I say again, one of you asked me this question—this is not about trusting. First, we need to be clear on what it means, and he needs to be clear on what it means. And then we need to see whether it is enforced. And if it is, fine. If it's not, then the alternative will be a clear course of action to everyone in the world.

Q. Is there any wiggle room in this agreement? Because even before you spoke, some of your critics predicted that you would buy an agreement that was not airtight simply as a way out.

The President. Well, I think it's obvious that I haven't looked for a way out here. What I have looked for is a way forward. The United States, because of our position in the world, is called upon to bring its power to bear when

it's important to do so. But we also should have the self-confidence and the conscience to show forbearance as well as strength, and to do what is right.

The objective is unassailable, and he has agreed to the objective, which is full and free and unfettered access. I have told you—not my critics, I have told you—that there are details in this agreement that still have to be flushed out, and there are provisions in it which require greater clarity, and we have to have those things resolved to our satisfaction in order to go forward.

But my instinct is, talking to the Secretary-General and talking to our partners, that we can resolve those things to our satisfaction. I'm hoping that we can, but I am not prejudging it. Ambassador Richardson has got his work cut out for him tomorrow, and the rest of our team will be working closely with him. We'll see what we're doing.

Q. Can you give us examples of those things where maybe you need clarification that could provide a problem?

The President. Well, we'll do that at the proper time. The Secretary-General has asked to have the opportunity—and I think he's entitled to it—to present the memorandum of understanding to the Security Council before the rest of us comment on the details. And I think that he is entitled to that. He's worked very hard; he's had very little sleep in the last several days. And I'm going to honor his request to that.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:42 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom; President Jacques Chirac of France; President Boris Yeltsin of Russia; and President Saddam Hussein of Iraq. The President also referred to the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM).