

Exchange With Reporters in Alexandria, Virginia March 20, 2002

Military Tribunals

Q. Mr. President?

The President. Yes.

Q. What are you hoping to achieve by holding the military tribunals? And at this point, do we have any people eligible to face those tribunals?

The President. Well, the tribunals are just an option for us. And we'll be using the tribunals if in the course of bringing somebody to justice it may jeopardize or compromise national security interests. So they're a tool; they're an option. As you know, we're discussing rules about how they can function well. The Defense Department asked a lot of opinions from respected scholars, and the world's now beginning to see what we meant by a fair system that will enable us to bring people to justice but at the same time protect national security. I have no plans right now to use anybody—nobody in mind yet. But the option is available.

Q. Are many of those people otherwise going to be sent back to their home countries, and have you decided which ones would be—

The President. Well, we're still in the process of getting as much information from the detainees as possible. Remember, these are—the ones in Guantanamo Bay are killers. They don't share the same values we share. They would like nothing more than to come after Americans or our friends and allies. And so, therefore, it's in our national interest to make sure we know enough about them before we decide what to do with them. So there's a process—ongoing process to get as much information as we can from the prisoners, the detainees. Some talk; some don't talk.

Q. But let me follow, if I could—

The President. There will only be three questions.

Q. Okay, sorry. But if you say they're killers—

The President. They said they're killers.

Q. —what makes them eligible to go to the tribunal?

The President. I told you, if any evidence that is required to convict them jeopardizes the national security interests of the country, we'll use the tribunal.

Situation in the Middle East

Q. Mr. President, are you frustrated by the continuing violence in the Middle East, that looks—one day it looks good, the next day it's—

The President. Of course I am. I am frustrated by the violence in the Middle East, and so are a lot of people who live in the Middle East. I know there are some people who do not want us to achieve any kind of peaceful settlement of a long-standing dispute. And they're willing to use terrorist means to disrupt any progress that's being made. And that frustrates me. It frustrates mothers and dads who happen to be Palestinians and Israelis, because they want to raise their children in a secure environment.

Nevertheless, we'll continue to work the issue and work it hard. Zinni is over there; he's making some progress. He's saying to both parties, "Stay the course. Work hard to get into Tenet." And hopefully we can achieve what we all want to achieve, which is eventually a political settlement. But first and foremost, we've got to come up with a security agreement. We made some progress, and I want to thank Zinni for his job that he's doing there. And I'm looking forward to being briefed by the Vice President tomorrow morning when he gets back from—he's getting back this afternoon, but he's going to come in tomorrow morning. We'll have breakfast first thing

in the morning, prior to me leaving for Mexico.

Q. Mr. President, just yesterday the Vice President was suggesting that he could meet with Chairman Arafat if there was a cease-fire. Does a cease-fire mean an end to all suicide bombings?

The President. Well, what he said was, was that there are certain conditions under which he would meet with Mr. Arafat, and that is getting into the Tenet agreement and meeting the conditions. And we've also said that we expect there to be a 100-percent effort by Chairman Arafat. We expect him to be reigning in those people with whom he's got influence. Clearly, he's not going to have influence with every single suicide bomber. I understand that. But we expect him to be diligent and firm and consistent in his efforts to rein in those who would like to disrupt any progress toward peace and rein in those who would harm our friends the Israelis.

And as I've said in the past, I didn't think he has done a very good job of doing that up to now, and I believe he can do a better job. And that's exactly the message the Vice President is delivering in his statement.

Listen, thank you all very much. I don't want to hold two press conferences in one week.

NOTE: The exchange began at 1:25 p.m. in the mini-auditorium at Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School. In his remarks, the President referred to U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East Gen. Anthony Zinni, USMC (Ret.); and Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority. The President also referred to the Tenet plan, the Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire and security plan of June 13, 2001, negotiated by Director of Central Intelligence George J. Tenet. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included Mrs. Bush's closing remarks.

Remarks at Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School in Alexandria March 20, 2002

Thank you, Laura, for that warm introduction. I appreciate what a fine job she's doing as the First Lady. She's a pretty calm voice in a time—in turbulent times for our country, and I'm lucky to be married to her.

I want to thank all the Tucker Tigers for letting me come by to say hello. Gosh, it's good to see you all. I want to thank the fact that you understand that you can make a big difference in somebody's life, that you can help a boy and girl who needs help, and you've done a darn good job. I understand you raised \$2,500. That's a lot of money to raise, but you did it by reading books.

So you accomplished two things: One, you helped somebody in Afghanistan who needs your help; and secondly, you prac-

ticed reading, which is one of the most important things you can do. I hope you read more than you watch TV. That's really important. How many of you are going to go to college? Can you raise your hands if you're thinking about going to college? Boy, that's great. Guess what? That means you've set an important goal. That's what that means; you've set a good, important goal. It also means you'd better learn how to read. So by reading all those books, it's really a good step toward meeting your goal.

So thanks for letting us come. I also want to thank your teachers. Thank you all for being teachers. Teaching is a noble profession, an incredibly important job. So make sure you listen to your teachers. They care about you a lot, and they want you to meet