

Arizona; Robert Fannin, Arizona State chairman, and Mike Hellon, Arizona national committeeman, Republican National Com-

mittee; and former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

Remarks to the Troops at a Thanksgiving Dinner in Baghdad, Iraq November 27, 2003

Thank you. I was just looking for a warm meal somewhere. [*Laughter*] Thanks for inviting me to dinner. General Sanchez, thank you, sir, for your kind invitation and your strong leadership. Ambassador Bremer, thank you for your steadfast belief in freedom and peace. I want to thank the members of the Governing Council who are here, pleased you are joining us for one of our Nation's great holidays. It's a chance to give thanks to the Almighty for the many blessings we receive.

I'm particularly proud to be with the 1st Armored Division, the 2d ACR, and the 82d Airborne. I can't think of a finer group of folks to have Thanksgiving dinner with than you all. We're proud of you. Today Americans are gathering with their loved ones to give thanks for the many blessings in our lives, and this year we are especially thankful for the courage and the sacrifice of those who defend us, the men and women of the United States military.

I bring a message on behalf of America: We thank you for your service; we're proud of you; and America stands solidly behind you. Together, you and I have taken an oath to defend our country. You're honoring that oath. The United States military is doing a fantastic job. You are defeating the terrorists here in Iraq so that we don't have to face them in our own country. You're defeating Saddam's henchmen so that the people of Iraq can live in peace and freedom.

By helping the Iraqi people become free, you're helping change a troubled and violent part of the world. By helping to build a peaceful and democratic country in the

heart of the Middle East, you are defending the American people from danger, and we are grateful.

You're engaged in a difficult mission. Those who attack our coalition forces and kill innocent Iraqis are testing our will. They hope we will run. We did not charge hundreds of miles into the heart of Iraq, pay a bitter cost in casualties, defeat a brutal dictator, and liberate 25 million people only to retreat before a band of thugs and assassins.

We will prevail. We will win because our cause is just. We will win because we will stay on the offensive. And we will win because you're part of the finest military ever assembled. And we will prevail because the Iraqis want their freedom. Every day, you see firsthand the commitment and sacrifice that the Iraqi people are making to secure their own freedom.

I have a message for the Iraqi people: You have an opportunity to seize the moment and rebuild your great country based on human dignity and freedom. The regime of Saddam Hussein is gone forever. The United States and our coalition will help you, help you build a peaceful country so that your children can have a bright future. We'll help you find and bring to justice the people who terrorized you for years and are still killing innocent Iraqis. We will stay until the job is done. I'm confident we will succeed because you, the Iraqi people, will show the world that you're not only courageous but that you can govern yourself wisely and justly.

On this Thanksgiving, our Nation remembers the men and women of our military, your friends and comrades, who paid the ultimate price for our security and freedom. We ask for God's blessings on their families, their loved ones, and their friends, and we pray for your safety and your strength as you continue to defend America and to spread freedom.

Each one of you has answered a great call, participating in an historic moment in world history. You live by a code of honor: service to your Nation for the safety and the security of your fellow citizens. Our military is full of the finest people on the face of the Earth. I'm proud to be your

Commander in Chief. I bring greetings from America.

May God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at approximately 6 p.m. at Baghdad International Airport. In his remarks, he referred to Lt. Gen. Ricardo S. Sanchez, USA, commander, Coalition Joint Task Force Seven; L. Paul Bremer III, Presidential Envoy to Iraq; and former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks. The Thanksgiving Day proclamation of November 21 is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.

Remarks and an Exchange With Reporters Aboard Air Force One November 27, 2003

President's Visit to Iraq

The President. I thank you for honoring the confidentiality necessary to pull this off. I made the decision to go because I wanted our troops not only that were there to have dinner but the troops in harm's way to know that their Commander in Chief and, more importantly, their country support. And I thought the best way to do that would be to spend time with them on Thanksgiving to thank them and to send a message—you know, the message I sent, which is we appreciate their sacrifices.

You know, Thanksgiving has got to be hard for young troops, to know that their families are gathered, having dinner, a turkey feast and everything. That's got to be a lonely moment for them. And I felt like at this point that it would be—hopefully, it would help them to see their President. And I recognize that I didn't see every troop in harm's way scattered throughout the region, but the word will get out, thanks to you all.

The idea first came up in mid-October. Andy said, "Would you be interested in

going to Baghdad?" And I said, "Yes, I would, except I don't want to go if it puts anybody in harm's way. It's very essential that I fully understand all aspects of the trip, starting with whether or not we could get in/out safely, whether or not my presence there would in any way cause the enemy to react and therefore jeopardize somebody else's life."

I felt it was important to send a message that we care for them and we support them strongly and that we erase any doubt in their minds as to whether or not the people stand with them. You know, I understood the consequences and risks. And over time, I was assured by the planners and, as importantly, our military people and the pilot here of this airplane that the risk could be minimized if we were able to keep the trip quiet. I was fully prepared to turn this plane around.

I thought a crucial moment yesterday was when I saw you all. That's why I said, you know, no phones. A crucial moment in this trip, frankly, was in between changing planes, and I wasn't sure whether or