

NOTE: The President spoke at 12:14 p.m. at the Hilton McLean Tysons Corner. In his remarks, he referred to Virginia State Attorney General Jerry W. Kilgore; Kate

Obenshain Griffin, Virginia State chairman, Republican National Committee; and former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

## Remarks Announcing the Nomination of Alphonso Jackson To Be Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and an Exchange With Reporters December 12, 2003

*The President.* Good afternoon. I am pleased to announce that I will nominate Alphonso Jackson of Dallas, Texas, to serve as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

Since 2001, Alphonso Jackson has given fine service as Deputy Secretary of the Department, responsible for many of the day-to-day operations of HUD. In his career, Alphonso has been a senior administrator of housing agencies in three cities, St. Louis and Washington and Dallas. He's an experienced executive in the public and private sectors, a man who knows the issues facing HUD and knows how to get things done.

I can tell you from personal experience that Alphonso is a man of great integrity and compassion. We used to live in the same neighborhood in Dallas. [*Laughter*] I used to drop by for an occasional cup of coffee, sometimes unannounced. [*Laughter*] I'm pleased that he has agreed to join my Cabinet.

I'm also grateful to former Secretary Martinez, Mel Martinez, for his outstanding leadership of HUD over the past 3 years. These have been years of important progress for the Department, for its mission, and for the families across America that benefit from its good work. Over the last 3 years, homeownership in America has reached its highest level ever, and in the last 18 months, more than a million minority citizens have become homeowners.

As leader of HUD, Mel has repaid my confidence many times over. He is a good

man and a good friend, and I thank him for his service to our Nation, and I wish Mel and Kitty all the very best.

With the Senate's approval, Mel Martinez will be succeeded by another man who understands the struggles and hopes of urban America. Alphonso Jackson grew up in a family with 12 children, a housing challenge unto itself. [*Laughter*] His dad, Arthur, worked three jobs, educated his children, and instilled the values that have carried his son far in life.

These values and experiences have also shaped the priorities Alphonso brings to his new assignment. He believes, as I do, that homeownership is a source of stability for our communities and a source of dignity for our families. He believes our Government can provide effective help to our fellow citizens who are homeless, and he has seen how entire neighborhoods can turn themselves around with strong local leadership and the help of our Federal Government. Alphonso is just the man to carry on the work of compassionate conservatism in America's cities.

Laura and I have known Alphonso and Marcia for many years. They're close friends, and I appreciate you coming, Marcia. I also want to welcome the other members of your family who are here.

Alphonso is a friend, and he's one of the most experienced and respected authorities on housing policy in America. He will be a superb Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. I want to thank you

for accepting this assignment and congratulate you, my friend.

[At this point, Deputy Secretary Jackson made brief remarks.]

*The President.* I thought I would answer a couple of questions. Jennifer [Jennifer Loven, Associated Press].

#### *Halliburton Contract in Iraq*

*Q.* Yes, sir, thank you. With the Pentagon looking into the Halliburton contract, are you concerned that that gives some fuel to your critics that the contract was inappropriate in the first place?

*The President.* I appreciate the Pentagon looking out after the taxpayers' money. They felt like there was an overcharge issue. They put the issue right out there on the table for everybody to see, and they're doing good work. We're going to watch—we're going to make sure that as we spend the money in Iraq that it's spent well and spent wisely. And their investigation will lay the facts out for everybody to see. And if there's an overcharge, like we think there is, we expect that money to be repaid.

Randy [Randall Mikkelsen, Reuters].

#### *Middle East Peace Process*

*Q.* Mr. President, Secretary Powell has been meeting with unofficial Middle East peace negotiators, despite Israel's objections. And there's other signs of U.S. dissatisfaction with Israel. My question is, what does Israel need to do to convince you that it's doing its part in the peace process?

*The President.* Randy, you may remember I gave the speech on June 24, 2002. I laid out exactly what I think must happen in order for us to achieve peace in the Middle East, in order for the Palestinian state to emerge that is at peace with Israel. And I haven't changed my opinion. Step one is for all parties to fight off terror, to stop the few from destroying the hopes of the many. Step two is for the Palestin-

ians to find leadership that is willing to reject the tired old policy of the past and lead the Palestinian people to not only a democratic state but a peaceful solution of differences.

Israel must be mindful that the decisions they make today will make it difficult to create—must be mindful that they don't make decisions that make it hard to create a Palestinian state. It's in Israel's interests there be a Palestinian state. It's in the poor, suffering Palestinian people's interest there be a Palestinian state. The Arab world has got responsibilities to see that this vision be implemented.

*Q.* But why these contacts with the unofficial negotiators?

*The President.* I'm sure the Secretary of State meets with all kinds of people all the time. But the policy of this administration was laid out in the Rose Garden for everybody to see, everybody to listen to.

You might remember I took that policy to Aqaba, Jordan. I stood up in front of the world and said this man has—he, Abu Mazen, came to the Oval Office and said, "I'm willing to join you, Mr. President, to help fight off terror," because he understood that terror was what was preventing progress from being made. He said, "I'm willing to work to put the institutions in place for a Palestinian state." And as we began to make progress, he got shoved aside, and that's why we're stalled where we are today.

It is time for Palestinian leadership to emerge that believes in peace and believes in the aspirations of the Palestinian people.

April [April Ryan, American Urban Radio Networks], I see you've got something that you'd like to ask. First, let me ask you a question. As you're heading into—my turn to ask you a question. [Laughter] So this is your first Christmas season as a mom.

*Q.* Second, actually, 18 months.

*The President.* Exactly right. [Laughter] Good answer. I was just trying to check and see if you knew—if you and I both

knew how old your child was. [Laughter]  
Do you have a question to the President?

*Halliburton Contract in Iraq*

Q. Yes, I do, sir. Mr. President—

*The President.* Do you remember what it is? [Laughter]

Q. You can throw a person, you know that. [Laughter] Mr. President, many of your critics are saying that you should distance yourself from Halliburton, and they say it's an albatross around this administration's neck, particularly the Vice President and you. What are your thoughts about that?

*The President.* My thoughts are, is that I expect anybody doing business with the United States Government to be transparent and to give the taxpayers a good return on their money. That's what I expect. And if anybody is overcharging the Government, we expect them to repay that money.

Wendell [Wendell Goler, FOX News].

*Iraqi Debt Relief*

Q. Mr. President, in light of the New York Times editorial today, tell me why—

*The President.* Right. Let me stop you, Wendell. I don't read those editorials—[laughter]—so you're going to have to—maybe you ought to ask the question not in that context, but in another context. Sorry to interrupt you.

Q. All right, sir. Tell me why former Secretary of State Baker's ties with Carlyle Group and with Baker Botts don't pose a conflict of interest in this new task you have given him of restructuring Iraq's debt?

*The President.* Jim Baker is a man of high integrity. He's a man of enormous experience. And it makes sense for him to serve our country on an important mission. And that mission is to encourage countries to forgive debt so the Iraqi people can more easily grow a nation that is prosperous and peaceful.

And Jim Baker is—we're fortunate to have Jim Baker agree to serve our country. We're fortunate he decided to take time out of what is an active life but one out of the press and one that's probably not nearly as stressful as it has been when he's been involved in public service, to step forward and serve America. We're fortunate that he is willing to do that, and I thank him for that.

And I'm really happy that he has agreed to serve. His mission is to go to Paris and Berlin and Moscow and London to convince these countries to forgive debt. And I'm hopeful they do forgive debt. I'm hopeful that they're willing, in some cases, to contribute for the first time to the efforts of the Iraqi citizens. See, it's in the interest of their countries that Iraq be free and peaceful. Matter of fact, it's in the interest of all countries that Iraq be peaceful and free. It makes us all more secure. Imagine what the effect is going to have—a peaceful and free Iraq is going to have in the heart of the Middle East, where there's so much violence and hatred.

And so Jim Baker is on a noble mission. He'll do a great job. I didn't mean to dis the New York Times editorial page, but I just didn't—I'm not reading it a lot these days. [Laughter]

Yes, sir.

Q. Mr. President—

*The President.* Or anybody else's, for that matter.

Q. I have no ties with the New York Times. [Laughter]

*The President.* You didn't mean to dis it either, then. [Laughter]

*Strength of the Dollar*

Q. Mr. President, the dollar fell again against the euro. Mr. Snow, your Treasury Secretary, says that the decline has been orderly, boosting exports. Do you plan any intervention to stop the slide in the dollar?

*The President.* My answer to that question about the dollar is that this Government is for a strong dollar and that the

dollar's value ought to be set by the market and by the conditions inherent in our respective economies. And our economy is very strong and is getting stronger. But the policy, the stated policy—and not only the stated policy but the strong belief of this administration is that we have a strong dollar.

Well, listen, thank you all. Alphonso, congratulations.

*Deputy Secretary Jackson.* Thank you, Mr. President.

*The President.* I appreciate you coming.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:40 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) of the Palestinian Authority; and James A. Baker III, the President's personal envoy on the issue of Iraqi debt.

## Statement on Signing the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003

*December 12, 2003*

Today, I have signed into law H.R. 1828, the "Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2003." The Act is intended to strengthen the ability of the United States to conduct an effective foreign policy.

Section 5 of the Act purports to impose upon the President requirements to take certain actions against Syria unless the President either determines and certifies to the Congress that the Government of Syria has taken specific actions, or determines that it is in the national security interest of the United States to waive such requirements and reports the reasons for that determination to the Congress. A law cannot burden or infringe the President's exercise of a core constitutional power by attaching conditions precedent to the use of that power. The executive branch shall construe and implement section 5 in a manner consistent with the President's constitutional authority to conduct the Nation's foreign affairs and as Commander in Chief, in particular with respect to the conduct of foreign diplomats in the United States, the conduct of United States diplomats abroad, and the exportation of items and provision of services necessary to the performance

of official functions by United States Government personnel abroad.

Section 6 of the Act requires an officer in the executive branch to furnish information to the Congress on various subjects involving Syria and terrorism. The executive branch shall construe section 6 in a manner consistent with the President's constitutional authority to withhold information the disclosure of which could impair foreign relations, national security, the deliberative processes of the Executive, or the performance of the Executive's constitutional duties.

My approval of the Act does not constitute my adoption of the various statements of policy in the Act as U.S. foreign policy. Given the Constitution's commitment to the Presidency of the authority to conduct the Nation's foreign affairs, the executive branch shall construe such policy statements as advisory, giving them the due weight that comity between the legislative and executive branches should require, to the extent consistent with U.S. foreign policy.

GEORGE W. BUSH

The White House,  
December 12, 2003.