

Remarks Following Discussions With President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia and an Exchange With Reporters
February 25, 2004

President Bush. Here's what we're going to do. I will make a statement. The President will make a statement. I will then call upon an American correspondent to ask a question. The President will call upon a Georgian correspondent. We'll have two questions per side.

Mr. President, welcome. We followed the revolution that took place in your country very closely. We appreciate your firm commitment to democracy and freedom. We've had a very interesting discussion. I know firsthand that the President will do everything he can to earn the confidence of the people of Georgia by representing their will, by fighting corruption, by working for a system based upon integrity and decency and human rights.

I'm impressed by this leader. I'm impressed by his vision. I'm impressed by his courage. I am heartened by the fact that we have such a strong friend, a friend with whom we share values.

So Mr. President, welcome to the Oval Office. I appreciate the candid discussion we've had, and I'm proud to call you friend.

President Saakashvili. Thank you. It's a great honor, for me and for the people of Georgia, to be here in this Oval Office. It's not—our cooperation is very deep. We consider ourselves as very close ally and friend of the United States. We are proud to be friend of the United States. I am speaking on behalf of every Georgian.

I have to say that this cooperation, friendship—the U.S. helped us when we needed it most, and would like peoples—other peoples in Europe will never forget that. But our cooperation is—that held friendship is not only about security. It's not only about economy. Primarily it's about our shared values. And we are part of—proud part of antiterrorist coalition. We

have forces in Iraq. We are cooperating on other issues.

We are also working very hard on our improved relations with Russia. I had a very interesting conversation with President Putin in Moscow, and I believe Russia should become our reliable partner and we should improve our relations.

But at the same time, we believe that America's help is absolutely essential, and we are grateful. We will stay grateful, and we want to be not only close ally, but we want to be strong ally. Georgia will become stronger. Georgia will become more democratic. Democracy is top priority. Freedom of speech is top priority. Free enterprise, free market is top priority. And I think Georgia can become a role model for the whole region. And this is very important. We need U.S. help in that.

Regarding our revolution, it was the proudest moment of my own life and of life of the whole generation. And we are so proud that we were supported in our fight for democracy and for people's right to choose by the United States, and Washington was the first to come and help us. And I'm sure we'll never forget that.

Mr. President, I really enjoyed being here at the White House. Thank you very much.

President Bush. Thank you. Hold on a second, please. Deb [Deb Riechmann, Associated Press], we're going to—

Q. What do you think about—

President Bush. Hold on, please. Will somebody translate—

President Saakashvili. It's in English.

President Bush. I understand. I understand. Hold on for a second. The way this is going to work is this.

Q. I'm from Georgia.

President Bush. I know you are, excuse me. We're going to start with the American

press, and then there will be a Georgian press, and then there will be an American press, and then there will be a Georgian press. That's the best way to maintain order, so we don't have everybody yelling at the same time.

Deb.

Federal Deficit/Social Security

Q. Mr. President, Chairman Greenspan today suggested trimming Social Security benefits for baby boomers to deal with the rising budget deficit. Do you think this is a good idea, a good way to ease the deficit, which is expected to top over \$520 billion this year?

President Bush. First of all, let me talk about the short-term deficit. The best way to trim the deficit is to follow the budgetary plan I submitted to the United States Congress. We presented a plan that will cut the deficit in half over the next 5 years. I haven't talked to the Chairman or read his comments. I need to see exactly what he said. My position on Social Security benefits is this, that those benefits should not be changed for people at or near retirement.

As you know, in the 2000 campaign, I articulated a point of view that we ought to have personal savings accounts for younger workers that would make sure those younger workers receive benefits equal to or greater than that which is expected. I still maintain the same position, but I haven't seen his comments completely.

Georgia's Rose Revolution

Q. What do you think about Rose Revolution in Georgia?

President Bush. The Rose Revolution? It was an historic moment. It was a moment where the people spoke. It was a moment where a Government changed because the people peacefully exercised their voice and raised their voice. And Georgia transitioned to a new Government in an inspiring way.

The President and I discussed the ramifications of the Rose Revolution around other parts of the world. The possibility of people taking charge of their own lives and transforming society in a peaceful way is a powerful example to people around the world who long for freedom and long for honest government.

And so the Rose Revolution is an inspiring moment of history. And again, I want to congratulate the President and his team for insisting that democracy prevail through peaceful means.

Steve [Steve Holland, Reuters].

Situation in Haiti

Q. Mr. President, in Haiti, the rebels are advancing and a power-sharing deal has collapsed. Are you prepared to let President Aristide be overthrown?

President Bush. Secretary Powell and I have been in close consultations on this subject. We still hope to be able to achieve a political settlement between the current Government and the rebels. We are watching the situation very carefully. The Secretary of State has been in touch with Canadian officials and French officials and Caribbean officials, all aimed to convince the parties to come to the table and effect a peaceful solution.

In terms of our own planning here, I have made it abundantly clear to the Coast Guard that we will turn back any refugee that attempts to reach our shore. And that message needs to be very clear as well to the Haitian people. We will have a robust presence with an effective strategy. And so we encourage, strongly encourage the Haitian people to stay home as we work to reach a peaceful solution to this problem.

Q. Do you think it's possible you'll have to send troops there?

President Bush. What we are—incident to a political settlement, we will encourage the international community to provide a security presence. And that is also being discussed right now. But first things, first,

Steve, is to work on a—is to work on a political solution.

Georgia-Russia Relations

Q. —very complicated problems, with Russian bases problems—

President Bush. Well, I appreciate you bringing up the Russian bases problem. We expect the Russian Government to honor the Istanbul commitment. The Istanbul commitment made it very clear that Russia would leave those places. We will continue to work with the President and President Putin on that commitment.

I also appreciate very much the President's work with the Russians. It's important that relations between Georgia and Russia be positive. I found it a very positive move and a very sophisticated move by the President that his first trip was to Russia, and I encouraged that. I thought it was a smart thing to do. And we will work with Vladimir Putin, with whom I've got a good relationship, to make sure relations

are good with Georgia. It's important for the Georgian people to have good and strong and peaceful relations with Russia. There's a lot we can work on. We can work together to fight terror. Hopefully, as the Georgia economy improves—improves—and I'm confident it will—there will be opportunities for—business opportunities.

So the President has got a good vision and this has been a good trip. I believe in his abilities, and I appreciate his vision. And the people of Georgia will be well served by his leadership.

Thank you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:26 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to President Vladimir Putin of Russia. A reporter referred to President Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti. A portion of these remarks could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.

Letter to Congressional Leaders on the Deployment of U.S. Military Forces in Response to Security Concerns for United States Embassy Personnel in Haiti

February 25, 2004

Dear Mr. Speaker: (Dear Mr. President:)

Increasing armed rebellion in Haiti, the limited effectiveness of the Haitian National Police, and insecurity in Port-au-Prince brought on by increased armed pro-government gang activity have contributed to a climate of insecurity for the U.S. Embassy and its supporting facilities in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. These circumstances and the potential for further deterioration of the security environment in Haiti render the safety of the U.S. Embassy, its facilities, and U.S. personnel uncertain.

On February 23, 2004, a security force of approximately 55 U.S. military personnel from the U.S. Joint Forces Command de-

ployed to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to augment the Embassy security forces.

Although the U.S. forces are equipped for combat, this movement was undertaken solely for the purpose of protecting American citizens and property. It is anticipated that U.S. forces will provide this support until such time as it is determined that the security situation has stabilized and the threat to the Embassy, its facilities, and U.S. personnel has ended.

I have taken this action pursuant to my constitutional authority to conduct U.S. foreign relations and as Commander in Chief and Chief Executive. I am providing this report as part of my efforts to keep the