

around the world to environmental cleanup to enhancing conservation and developing new sources of energy for the future. Every day, employees at the Department of Energy are working to protect the American people and to ensure that our country's homes and businesses have reliable, safe, and affordable supplies of energy.

During the last 4 years, the Department of Energy has been active and effective and has delivered important results for the American people. We've taken vital steps to upgrade the Nation's energy infrastructure. We have begun an ambitious research program to develop a viable hydrogen-powered automobile. We have strengthened cooperation between the United States and foreign governments to safeguard nuclear materials and to fight proliferation.

For these achievements and more, the Nation is grateful to Secretary Spencer Abraham. As a United States Senator and a Cabinet Secretary, Spence has shown himself to be a man of integrity and wisdom. He's a good man, a superior public servant, and a friend. And I thank Spence for leading his Department so ably, and I wish him and Jane all the best.

During the next 4 years, we will continue to enhance our economic security and our national security through sound energy policy. We will pursue more energy close to

home, in our own country and in our own hemisphere, so that we're less dependent on energy from unstable parts of the world. We will continue improving pipelines and gas terminals and powerlines, so that energy flow is reliable. We will develop and deploy the latest technology to provide a new generation of cleaner and more efficient energy sources. We will promote strong conservation measures.

In all these steps, we will bring greater certainty of costs and supply, and that certainty is essential to economic growth and job creation. And we will continue to work closely with Congress to produce comprehensive legislation that moves America toward greater energy independence. I'm optimistic about the task ahead, and I know Sam Bodman is the right man to lead this important and vital agency. So I urge the Senate to confirm his nomination without delay.

Congratulations, Sam.

[At this point, Secretary-designate Bodman made brief remarks.]

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:44 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Secretary-designate Bodman.

Remarks at Fort Belvoir, Virginia December 10, 2004

Listen, Laura and I are thrilled to be out here, and we want to thank you all for greeting us and thank you for giving us a chance to participate in this assembly line of compassion.

First, I want to thank Elaine Rogers, who is the president of the USO of metropolitan Washington. Ned Powell—I appreciate Ned for being here as well. It turns out that my grandfather Prescott S. Bush was the

first president and CEO of USO, so it's only fitting that I'm coming—working in the assembly line. *[Laughter]* But I want to thank you for your leadership.

I want to thank Cheryl Hall. I want to thank Colonel T.W. Williams, the garrison commander of Ft. Belvoir. I want to thank Command Sergeant Major Andre Douglas. He reminded me that he and I spent Thanksgiving together last year in Baghdad.

So it's great to see you again, Command Sergeant Major. I want to thank Mary Jo Myers, the wife of my friend General Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

Most of all, I want to thank all the volunteers who are here. I want to thank your spirit.

So, Scott asked me what's—what are we doing? I said, "We're sending packages to our troops overseas, a package full of all different goodies, you know, a little gum, playing cards." But you can't ever thank the troops enough. This is one way of saying America appreciates your service to freedom and peace and our security. You can't put enough playing cards in there; you can't put enough sticks of gum.

But I hope our troops understand that with this package comes a lot of support and a lot of affection from not only a husband or a wife or a mom or a dad but, equally important, an average citizen who you never met, somebody who deeply appreciates your service, somebody who understands the mission, and somebody who stands solidly with you as you work to make the world a better place.

I know it's hard for our families—military families to be separated from a loved one during any time but, in particular, during the holiday season. And so we ask for God's blessings, not only on our troops who are overseas, but we ask for the Lord's blessings on our family members.

This is—this whole operation here is cranking out a lot of care packages. So far,

480,000 soldiers overseas have received a care package. And with it, as I said, is a message of good will and hope. We're—this is an historic time we live in. The world is changing. And as it changes, as the world becomes more free, America becomes more secure and the peace we all long for becomes more real.

And so during these holiday seasons, we thank our blessings, and one of the greatest blessings of all is the United States military and their families. Thank you for having us. I look forward to coming by to thank each of you.

Our intention here is not to stop progress but to encourage progress. [Laughter] Thanks for your hard work. If any of our fellow citizens are interested to know how you can help, there's a web page set up at the Defense Department and/or at the USA Freedom Corps for ways to help the USO or any other organization that supports our United States military.

God bless you all, and thanks for letting us come by.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:08 p.m. in the USO warehouse. In his remarks, he referred to Edward A. Powell, Jr., president and chief executive officer, United Service Organizations, Inc.; and Cheryl Laaker Hall, director, Operation USO Care Package. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of these remarks.

Statement on Signing the Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2004 *December 10, 2004*

Today, I have signed into law S. 2486, the "Veterans Benefits Improvement Act of 2004." The Act modifies and extends housing, education, and other benefits for the Nation's veterans.

Section 3677(d)(2)(B) of title 38, United States Code, as enacted by section 108 of the Act, purports to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to make a recommendation to the Congress on whether to continue a specified pilot project beyond its