

polls in defiance of the terrorists. Millions said, "We want to be free." And the United States of America will stand with our allies and friends to help freedom movements, whether it be in Lebanon or Iraq or all around the world, because freedom will lead to the peace we all long for.

In this new term, I look forward to working with you, Speaker, and the leaders and the Members of Congress. And as we do, as we work with you, we'll stick with our ideals. We'll make our case to the American people as plainly as we can possibly make it, and we're going to get the job done. That's why we're here. We're in Washington, DC, to serve the people of this country, to reform institutions that need to be reformed, to stand by principles. We are the party of Lincoln. We are the party for Lincoln at home, and we are the party for Lincoln abroad. We believe every citizen should live in a free society.

By expanding freedom at home, we will provide our citizens, all our citizens, the path of greater opportunity and more control over their own lives. And by expanding liberty abroad, we'll provide our citizens with security—the security they need to

build a prosperous and peaceful future for their children.

We're living in historic times. It's an incredibly exciting time to be serving our great Nation. I'm so honored to hold the position I hold, and I'm so honored to be able to work with such decent men and women of the United States Congress.

I want to thank all of you who have come tonight for supporting the Republican Party in the United States Congress. You're making a wise investment about the future of this country, an investment made upon principle, an investment based upon freedom, an investment that will help us stay a prosperous nation, and an investment that will allow each and every American to rise to his or her own God-given talents.

I love my country. I love working with the Congress. Thank you for coming tonight, and may God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:22 p.m. at the Washington Hilton Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Linda Bachus, wife of Representative Spencer Bachus; Rev. Steve Gaines, senior pastor, Gardendale's First Baptist Church, Gardendale, AL; and entertainer Patti LaBelle.

The President's News Conference March 16, 2005

The President. Thank you for giving me a chance to come by and say hello. I'm preparing for my trip out of town for Easter—the Easter week, and I thought I'd share some thoughts with you and answer some questions.

I am looking forward to continuing my dialog with the people on Social Security. It's important for the American people to understand that I believe the Social Security system has worked well, that Franklin Roosevelt did a positive thing when he created the Social Security system, but that

I am deeply concerned about the Social Security system for younger Americans. And I believe we're making progress on convincing the American people of two things: One, nothing will change for seniors, those who have retired or near retirement; and secondly, that we must work together to make sure the system works for a younger generation of Americans. That's progress.

As I said—I think I told you all earlier that one of my missions in the Social Security debate was to set that issue before the

people so that people fully understand why I was addressing it, in other words, why—I fully understand some in Washington are saying, “Why would the President bring this up. It’s a difficult issue. It may cause us to have to make a tough vote.” I’m making that case to the people and will continue to do so in Florida on Friday, and then we’ll head out west from Crawford and then back to Crawford for my meetings with Prime Minister Martin and President Fox.

I urge the Members to go out and, when they go home, to talk to their constituents not only about the problem but about solutions. I urge Members to start talking about how we’re going to permanently fix Social Security. The Members, I hope, would not talk about a bandaid solution, but I think it’s important for them to talk about a permanent fix, something that will last forever. I think the voters will appreciate people who come up with constructive suggestions, not statements merely in opposition of some ideas.

And so this is part of what I wanted to share with you, is that I’m actually enjoying myself on these trips. I hope you’re enjoying traveling with me. I like to get out of Washington. I like to discuss big issues. I like to remind people that my job is to confront problems, and I will continue to talk about Social Security for the next period of time.

Iraq had a meeting today of its Transitional National Assembly. It’s a bright moment in what is a process toward the writing of a constitution, the ratification of the constitution, and elections. And I want to congratulate the Iraqis for their Assembly. And it’s—we’ve always said this is a process, and today was a step in that process. And it’s a hopeful moment, I thought.

I am looking forward to seeing you down there in Crawford, those of you lucky enough to be able to travel with me. I wish you all a happy Easter. And I’ll be glad to answer some questions.

Coalition in Iraq/Transition in Iraq

Q. Mr. President, the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq once had 38 countries contributing troops, and now that number has fallen to 24. And yesterday, Italy said that it was going to start pulling out some forces in September. How can you keep the coalition from crumbling? And is it time to think about a timetable for pulling out some U.S. troops, given that the Iraqi Parliament was seated today, and you’re making progress in training some forces?

The President. Well, actually I called Silvio Berlusconi on another matter, which may or may not come up during this press conference. It’s—actually, I’ll give you a hint. I called him about the World Bank, and—[laughter]—and discussed my nominee, and—but he brought up the issue of Italian troops in Iraq and said, first of all, he wanted me to know that there was no change in his policy, that, in fact, any withdrawals would be done in consultation with allies and would be done depending upon the ability of Iraqis to defend themselves. And I said, “Are you sure I can say this to the press corps that will be wanting to know what took place in our conversation?” He said, “Absolutely.”

So I think what you’re going to find is that countries will be willing—or anxious to get out when Iraqis have got the capacity to defend themselves. And that’s the position of the United States. Our troops will come home when Iraq is capable of defending herself, and that’s generally what I find to be the case, Terry [Terence Hunt, Associated Press], when I’ve talked to other allies on this issue.

And we’re making progress. I’ve—I talk to General Casey quite frequently, and he keeps us abreast of the progress being made. One of the things—one of the issues in terms of Iraqi troops being able to defend their country is the ability to stand up chains of command. I think I’ve shared this with you before, and it’s still an issue that they’re working on. There’s officer

training schools, plus the ability for a command to go from a civilian government through a military chain of command, down to the lower ranks of troops. And there's positive signs that have taken place in the development of the Iraqi security force, and there's still work to be done. Our allies understand that.

But I say "anxious to come home," and every—nobody—I mean, people want their troops home, but they don't want their troops home if it affects the mission. We've gone—we've made a lot of progress. It's amazing how much progress has been made, thanks in large part to the courage of the Iraqi people. And when I talk to people, most understand we need to complete the mission. And completing the mission means making sure the Iraqis can defend themselves.

Q. So you don't think it's crumbling, the coalition?

The President. No, quite to the contrary, I think the coalition is—has been buoyed by the courage of the Iraqi people. I think they've been pleased and heartened by the fact that the Iraqis went to the polls and voted and they're now putting together a Government, and they see progress is being made. And I share that sense of enthusiasm about what's taking place in Iraq.

Yes, Steve [Steve Holland, Reuters].

Iran

Q. Yes, sir. The Iranians have dismissed the European incentive as insignificant. Should more incentives be offered? How long do they have until you take your case to the Security Council?

The President. Well, I—first of all, I want to thank our European friends for taking the lead on this issue, telling the Iranians that they should permanently abandon any enrichment or reprocessing, to make sure that Iran does not develop a nuclear weapon.

Let me review the bidding on this, if I might, just kind of the history, right quick. Iran has concealed its—a nuclear

program. That became discovered, not because of their compliance with the IAEA or NPT but because a dissident group pointed it out to the world, and—which raised suspicions about the intentions of the program. You can understand why. It's a nontransparent regime. They're run by a handful of people. And so suspicions were raised, and as a result of those suspicions, we came together with friends and allies to seek a guarantee that they wouldn't use any nuclear program to make weapons. A lot of people understand that if they did have a weapon, it would create incredible instability. It wouldn't be good for world peace.

And so the best way to do that—and this is where we are in the talks—was to say to the Iranians that they must permanently abandon enrichment and reprocessing. And the EU-3 meant it. And now we're waiting for an Iranian response.

Q. So how long do you—how long do you wait? When do you go to the Security Council?

The President. The understanding is we go to the Security Council if they reject the offer, and I hope they don't. I hope they realize the world is clear about making sure that they don't end up with a nuclear weapon.

David [David Gregory, NBC News].

Social Security Reform

Q. Mr. President, you say you're making progress in the Social Security debate. Yet private accounts, as the centerpiece of that plan, something you first campaigned on 5 years ago and laid before the American people, remains, according to every measure we have, poll after poll, unpopular with a majority of Americans. So the question is, do you feel that this is a point in the debate where it's incumbent upon you, and nobody else, to lay out a plan to the American people for how you actually keep Social Security solvent for the long term?

The President. First of all, Dave, let me, if I might correct you, be so bold as to

correct you. I have not laid out a plan yet, intentionally. I have laid out principles. I've talked about putting all options on the table, because I fully understand the administration must work with the Congress to permanently solve Social Security. So one aspect of the debate is, will we be willing to work together to permanently solve the issue?

Personal accounts do not solve the issue. But personal accounts will make sure that individual workers get a better deal with whatever emerges as a Social Security solution.

And the reason why is because a personal account would enable a worker to, voluntarily, by the way—this is a voluntary program; you can choose to join or choose not to join. The Government is not making you do that. It's your option, and you can decide whether or not you want to put some of your own money aside in a conservative mix in stocks and bonds to earn a better rate of return than that which you would earn—your money would earn inside the Social Security system. And over time, that compounds. It grows, and you would end up with a nest egg you could call your own.

And so I think it's an interesting idea and one that people ought to discuss to make sure the system works better for an individual worker. But it's very important for people to understand that the permanent solution will require Congress and the administration working together on a variety of different possibilities.

Q. But sir, but Democrats have made it pretty clear that they're not interested in that. They want you to lay it out, and so, what I'm asking is, don't—

The President. I'm sure they do. The first bill on the Hill always is dead on arrival. I'm interested in coming up with a permanent solution. I'm not interested in playing political games. [Laughter] I'm interested in working with members of both political parties.

Q. Will you say if you're specifically supportive of an income test for the slowing of future benefits? Could that get some kind of bipartisan consensus going?

The President. David, there's some interesting ideas out there. One of the interesting ideas was by this fellow—by a Democrat economist, name of Pozen. He came to visit the White House. He didn't see me, but came and tossed some interesting ideas out, talking about making sure the system was progressive. We're open for ideas. And I—look, I can understand why people say, "Make—force the President to either negotiate with himself or lay out his own bill." I want to work with members of both political parties. And I stood up in front of the Congress and said, "Bring your ideas forward." And I'm looking forward to people bringing ideas forward. That's how the process works, and I'm confident we'll get something done.

See, the American people want something done. They don't like partisan politics. They don't like people saying, "I'm not going to accept so-and-so's idea because it happens to come from a particular political party." What they want is people coming together to solve this problem.

John [John Roberts, CBS News].

Energy Prices/Energy Policy

Q. Mr. President, the price of oil is at record levels, well above the \$28 price point that you would prefer. The price of gasoline is projected to go above \$2.50 this spring. How concerned are you that this could start to affect the American economy? Is there more you could do to talk with oil-producing nations to get the price at the wellhead down? And is there more you could do, since part of the problem is refining capacity, to encourage oil companies who haven't built a new refinery in 20 years to start increasing their capacity domestically?

The President. No, I am concerned about the price of energy. I'm concerned about what it means to the average American

family when they see the price of gasoline going up. I'm concerned what it means to small businesses. I'm worried about the price of natural gas, particularly given the sense that—because a lot of utilities now rely upon natural gas to provide electricity for their consumers. And I have been worried about this since 2001, when I first showed up in Washington, DC.

I'm concerned about the relationship between the demand for oil—our growing economy's demand for oil, but more particularly, the demand for oil from—or energy, in general, from countries like China, fast-growing countries that are consuming a lot of raw materials and natural resources. And it is of concern, John. And that's why I went to the Congress and asked them to join in a comprehensive energy plan, which they have yet to do. I would hope that when Members go back to their districts and hear the complaints of people about the rising price of gasoline or complaints from small-business owners about the cost of energy, that they will come back and, in the spirit of—in a proper spirit, get a bill to my desk that encourages conservation and continue to find alternative sources of energy. The—and by the way, the modernization of the electricity grid is an important part of the energy bill.

I, frankly, don't think we need a lot of incentives for energy companies in the energy bill. The incentive is price. That's plenty of incentive for people to go out and find additional resources. I hope Congress passes ANWR. There's a way to get some additional reserves here at home on the books.

In terms of world supply, I think, if you look at all the statistics, demand is outracing supply, and supplies are getting tight. And that's why you're seeing the price reflected. And hopefully, there will be more conservation around the world, better conservation around the world as well as additional supplies of energy.

One thing is for certain: We've got to use our technology to, over time, evolve

away from reliance upon oil and gas and, at the same time, use our technologies to make sure we can use our plentiful resources like coal in an environmentally friendly way. I went to Columbus, Ohio, the other day and talked to the person responsible for the FutureGen plant, which is a innovative use of technology for there to be emissions-free coal-burning plants. That would not only be helpful for the United States, it would be helpful for the world, developing nations to be able to use this technology.

This is going to be a subject, by the way—was a subject of interest in my trip to Europe. In the councils of the EU, we talked about how we can work together on technological developments to change habits and change supply of the energy mix for the world. And this will be a topic of—at the G-8 as well.

Yes.

Q. Mr. President, could I follow up? Everybody else has had a chance to follow up.

The President. I know, I'm trying to break the habit. [Laughter] Sorry, it's not you, Roberts. Don't take it personally. [Laughter]

Q. I never do, sir.

The President. That's good. Neither do I.

Return of Detainees to Countries of Origin

Q. Mr. President, can you explain why you've approved of and expanded the practice of what's called rendition, of transferring individuals out of U.S. custody to countries where human rights groups and your own State Department say torture is common for people in custody?

The President. The post-9/11 world, the United States must make sure we protect our people and our friends from attack. That was the charge we have been given. And one way to do so is to arrest people and send them back to their country of origin with the promise that they won't be tortured. That's the promise we receive.

This country does not believe in torture. We do believe in protecting ourselves. We don't believe in torture. And——

Q. As Commander in Chief——

The President. Sorry, let—this is going to make Roberts feel terrible.

Q. That's all right.

The President. No, no, you shouldn't make——

Q. It doesn't bother me at all. [*Laughter*]

The President. Elisabeth [*Elisabeth Bumiller, New York Times*].

Q. As Commander in Chief, what is it that Uzbekistan can do in interrogating an individual that the United States can't?

The President. No, we seek assurances that nobody will be tortured when we render a person back to their home country.

Elisabeth.

Candidate for World Bank President

Q. Paul Wolfowitz, who was the—a chief architect of one of the most unpopular wars in our history——

The President. [*Laughter*] That's an interesting start. [*Laughter*]

Q. —is your choice to be the President of the World Bank. What kind of signal does that send to the rest of the world?

The President. Well, first of all, I think people—I appreciate the world leaders taking my phone calls as I explained to them why I think Paul will be a strong president of the World Bank. I've said he was a man of good experiences. He helped manage a large organization. The World Bank is a large organization. The Pentagon is a large organization; he's been involved in the management of that organization. He's a skilled diplomat, worked at the State Department in high positions. He was the Ambassador to Indonesia, where he did a very good job representing our country. And Paul is committed to development. He's a compassionate, decent man who will do a fine job in the World Bank. And that's why I called leaders of countries, and that's why I put him up.

I was pleased to see that Jim Wolfensohn, earlier today, made a very strong comment about Paul's candidacy. Jim Wolfensohn has done a fine job in leading the World Bank. He's represented the World Bank with a lot of class and a lot of dignity, and I think his comments are very important comments for—for people to get to know Paul better before the—before the vote is taken.

Jim [*Jim VandeHei, Washington Post*].

Representative Tom DeLay

Q. Sir, Tom DeLay, the House majority leader, has been admonished three times by the House Ethics Committee, is currently embroiled in several controversies involving a lobbyist who happened to be a pretty big fundraiser for your two campaigns. Do you have the full confidence in Tom DeLay, his tactics, and his leadership role in the Republican Party?

The President. I have confidence in Tom DeLay's leadership, and I have confidence in Tom DeLay. And I am—we've worked closely with Tom DeLay and the leaders in the House to get a lot done during the last 4 years, and I'm looking forward to working with him to get a lot done during the next 4 years. We've got a big agenda. We've got to get an energy bill out of the House. We've got to get more legal reform out of the House. We've got to get a Social Security reform package out of the House, got to get a budget out of the House. There's a lot going on. And Speaker Hastert and Leader DeLay and Whip Blunt are close allies and people with whom we're working to get a lot done.

Congressional Hearings on Steroid Use/ Major League Baseball

Q. Mr. President, you have spoken out about the need for owners, coaches, and players in all sports to stop steroid use. And you've also voiced reservations about Government getting too involved in that. And as you know, Congress is issuing subpoenas to Major League Baseball players

during spring training. Do you think that that's an abuse of power, or is it appropriate, in your view?

The President. Well, Congress generally has an independent mind of its own. I spoke out and was pleased to see that baseball responded, and they've got a testing policy in place for the first time ever, a firm testing policy in place. And it's very important that baseball then follow through and implement the testing and, obviously, deal with those who get caught cheating in the system.

And the hearings will go forward, I guess. I guess that's the current status. But I'm wise enough not to second-guess the intentions of the United States Congress.

I do appreciate the public concern about the use of steroids in sports, whether it be baseball or anywhere else, because I understand that when a professional athlete uses steroids, it sends terrible signals to youngsters. There's—we've had some stories in my own State. One of the newspapers there pointed out that they thought there was steroid use in high schools as a result of—in order to make sure these kids, at least in the kid's mind, could be a better athlete. It's a bad signal. It's not right.

And so I appreciate the fact that baseball is addressing this, and I appreciate the fact that the Congress is paying attention to the issue. This first started, of course, with Senator McCain, who basically said, "Get your house in order." And baseball responded, and my hope is the system will work.

Q. You have no problem with the subpoenas?

The President. No.

Carl [Carl Cameron, FOX News].

Judicial Nominations/Senate Rules Changes

Q. Mr. President, your judicial nominees continue to run into problems on Capitol Hill. Republicans are discussing the possibility of ending the current Democratic filibuster practice against it. And Democrats yesterday, led by Minority Leader Harry

Reid, went to the steps of the Capitol to say that if that goes forward, they will halt your agenda straight out. What does that say about your judicial nominees, the tone on Capitol Hill? And which is more important, judges or your agenda?

The President. Both. I believe that I have a obligation to put forth good, honorable people to serve on the bench and have done so. And I expect them to get up-or-down vote on the floor of the Senate. This isn't a new position for me, or the—I've been saying this for the last several years. And they ought to get a vote. They're getting voted out of committee, but they're not getting a vote on the floor. And I don't think it's fair to the candidates, and I don't think it's fair to the administration for this policy to go forward. And so—and hopefully, the Senate will be able to conduct business and also give my nominees a vote, an up-or-down vote on the floor of the Senate.

Yes, sir. John [John McKinnon, Wall Street Journal].

Social Security Reform

Q. Sir, on Social Security, what is the timeline that you want to see for action by Congress on a bill? When do you start to get worried about not getting something done this year? And also, if I can add, would you be willing to drop personal accounts in order to get a bill?

The President. Personal accounts are very important for the individuals. It's a—you know, it's interesting—David quoted some poll. There's all kinds of polls. For every poll you quote, I'll quote another one. It's kind of the way Washington works these days. They poll everything. The one I read the other day said people like the idea of personal accounts.

I think people like the idea of being able to take some of their own money—in other words, the Government says, "You can decide," as opposed to, "We'll decide for you"—you get to decide if this is in your interest. And you get to decide whether

you want to set some of your own money aside in an account that will earn a better rate of return than that which will be earned in the Social Security system. That's an important part of making sure the system works for the individual.

I repeat, personal accounts do not permanently fix the solution. They make the solution more attractive for the individual worker. And that's important for people to understand, John, and that's why it's very important for Congress to discuss this issue.

In terms of timetables, as quickly as possible—whatever that means. No, I am going to—one of the things that I think is very important for people to understand is that I believe that we have a duty to work on big problems in Washington, DC, and so I'm going to continue working on this. And it's, I guess—I'm not going to go away on the issue, because the issue is not going to go away. The longer we wait, the more difficult it is to solve the problem.

And listen, I fully understand it's a difficult issue. Otherwise, it would have been solved a long time ago. And I understand some Members don't—view this as a tough vote. In other words, "Why did you bring it up? It's a tough vote." And—but that's just not the way I think, John. I think we have a duty. I truly do. This is—now is the time to get this solved. I remember 1983, this "We've got a 75-year solution." It wasn't a 75-year solution that they came up with. It was a—I liked the spirit of people coming together from both parties to sit down and see if they couldn't solve the immediate problem, but it wasn't a 75-year solution because we're talking about it now. And at 2018, the situation starts to get worse because more money is coming into the system—I mean, more money is going out of the system than coming in.

You know, one thing about Social Security—I'm sorry to blow on here, but now that you asked—a lot of people in America think there is a trust: Your money goes in; the Government holds it; and then the

Government gives you your money back when you retire. That's just not the way it works. And it's important for the American citizens to understand it's a pay-as-you-go system. And right now, we're paying for a lot of programs other than Social Security with the payroll tax coming in, thereby leaving a pile of IOUs. And part of why I think a personal account is an attractive option for a younger worker is that there will be real assets in the system at this point in time.

I also will continue reminding people, when it comes to personal accounts, that the system oftentimes doesn't work for a widow. You know, if a wage-earner dies prior to 62, there are no spousal benefits available until 62. If the spouse—both spouses work, the spouse that survives will get the higher of his or her Social Security benefits or the death benefits but not both. In other words, somebody's contribution to the system just goes away. And a personal account will enable somebody to leave behind an asset base to whomever he or she chooses. And that's an important concept for people to understand.

Peter [Peter Baker, Washington Post].

Death Penalty

Q. Mr. President, your administration recently called on the Texas courts to review some death cases—some death penalty cases down there.

The President. Yes.

Q. And during your State of the Union, you talked about the importance of DNA evidence, and you talked about the possibility that maybe there were inequities in the system and the lawyers that represent death row inmates. I'm wondering if this represents a change in your feelings about the death penalty since you were Governor of Texas. And if there are the possibilities—the possibilities exist of problems, why not call on—for a moratorium?

The President. No, I still support the death penalty, and I think it's a deterrent

to crime. But I want to make sure, obviously, that those subject to the death penalty are truly guilty. And that's why I talked about what I talked about and why I made the decisions I made. I think, regardless of your position on the issue, one of the things we've got to make sure is that we use, in this case, technology, DNA technologies, to make sure that we're absolutely certain about the innocence or guilt of a person accused.

Yes.

Saint Patrick's Day/Northern Ireland Peace Process

Q. Mr. President, are you trying to send a message to the IRA by not inviting Gerry Adams and the other Northern Ireland politicians tomorrow?

The President. I talked to Bertie Ahern about this and—at the EU, and he just asked who was coming to the events, which—I said, “You are, for certain.” And we wanted to make sure that we honored those in civil society in Ireland who are contributing positively to the peace process. And that's what we'll be doing on this particular trip.

It's very important that people understand that the parties must renounce violence. There's a—the Good Friday agreement laid out the way forward for peace in Northern Ireland, and this administration and our Government strongly supports those steps. But tomorrow's message will be, we want to thank those in civil society who are working hard to achieve a peaceful resolution.

Q. By inviting the widow—the sisters, rather, of this man who was killed—

The President. That's part of the statement, a very strong part of the statement, and I'm looking forward to meeting these very brave souls. They've committed themselves to a peaceful solution. And hopefully, their loved one will not have died in vain. I mean, out of this—hopefully, some good will come out of the evil perpetuated on this family.

Yes, sir.

Hizballah/Lebanon

Q. Mr. President, yesterday you said that Hizballah could prove it is not a terrorist organization by laying down arms and supporting peace. How willing and flexible, and under what conditions are you able to, as you promote democracy in the Middle East, encourage parties like Hizballah to discontinue the use of terrorism as a tactic?

The President. Yes, I think—let me make sure that you put my answer into full context. I first said that Hizballah is on the terrorist list for a reason, because they have killed Americans in the past, and they—they're a violent organization. And the question was about Lebanon, and let me take a step back, if I might, on this question, because it's important for the American people to understand our policy.

Our policy is this: We want there to be a thriving democracy in Lebanon. We believe that there will be a thriving democracy, but only if—but only if—Syria withdraws not only her troops completely out of Lebanon but also her secret service organizations, intelligence organizations—not secret service—intelligence organizations. I am concerned and the world should be concerned that the intelligence organizations are embedded in a lot of Government functions in Lebanon, and there needs to be a complete withdrawal of those services in order for there to be a free election. And we will—this Government will work with elected leaders of a free, truly free Lebanon, and looking forward to it.

I like the idea of people running for office. There's a positive effect when you run for office. Maybe some will run for office and say, “Vote for me; I look forward to blowing up America.” I don't know; I don't know if that will be their platform or not. But it's—I don't think so. I think people who generally run for office say, “Vote for me; I'm looking forward to fixing your potholes or making sure you've got bread on

the table.” And so—but Hizballah is on the terrorist list for a reason and will remain on the terrorist list for a reason. Our position has not changed on Hizballah.

Judy [Judy Keen, USA Today].

Same-Sex Marriage

Q. President Bush, a court ruling in California this week has revived debate over same-sex marriage. You support a constitutional amendment to ban such marriages. But it's not something you talk about nearly as often as Social Security and many other issues. Will you put some muscle behind that effort this year? Or is it something you'd prefer not to deal with?

The President. No, I haven't changed my position. And as a matter of fact, the court rulings are verifying why I took the position I took, and that is, I don't believe judges ought to be deciding this issue. I believe this is an issue of particular importance to the American people and should be decided by the people. And I think the best way to do so is through the constitutional process. I haven't changed my mind at all. As a matter of fact, court rulings such as this strengthen my position, it seems like to me. People now understand why I laid out the position I did.

Q. What can you do to promote action on that amendment?

The President. Well, I—the courts are going to promote a lot of the action by their very rulings. People will understand that—the logic behind the decision I made. And no matter what your position is on the issue, this is an issue that should be decided by the people, not by judges. And the more the judges start deciding the issue, I'm confident the more the people will want to be involved in the issue. This is a very important issue for the country and one that obviously needs to be conducted with a great deal of sensitivity and concern about other people's feelings. But this is—it's an issue I feel strongly about.

Yes, Stretch [Bill Sammon, Washington Times].

Democracy in the Middle East

Q. Mr. President, you faced a lot of skepticism in the runup to the Iraq war and then a lot of criticism for miscalculating some of the challenges of postwar Iraq. Now that the Iraq elections seem to be triggering signs of democratization throughout the broader Middle East, do you feel any sense of vindication?

The President. First of all, I fully understand that as long as I'm the President, I will face criticism. It's like part of the job. Frankly, you wouldn't be doing your job if you didn't occasionally lay out the gentle criticism. I welcome constructive ideas as to how we might do our job better, so that doesn't bother me. And therefore, since it doesn't bother me and I expect it, I don't then leak—seek vindication.

Look, history—shall I give you my talk on history and Presidencies? Okay, thank you. I don't—what's interesting is George Washington is now getting a 2d or 3d or 5th or 10th look in history. I read the Ellis book, which is a really interesting book, and—“His Excellency,” it's called. David McCullough is writing a book on George Washington as well. People are constantly evaluating somebody's standing in history, a President's standing in history, based upon events that took place during the Presidency, based upon things that happened after the Presidency, based upon—like in my case, hopefully, the march of freedom continues way after my Presidency. And so I just don't worry about vindication or standing.

The other thing, it turns out, in this job you've got a lot on your plate on a regular basis. You don't have much time to sit around and kind of wander lonely in the Oval Office, kind of asking different portraits, “How do you think my standing will be?” [Laughter] I've got a lot to do. And I like to make decisions, and I make a lot of them.

But no, you know, look, the people who deserve the credit in Iraq are the Iraqi

citizens that defied the terrorists. Imagine what it would be like to try to go vote thinking that there could be a suicide bomber standing next to you in line, or somebody would lob a shell or a mortar at you. The courage of the Iraqi citizens was just overwhelming, I thought. It's easy for us to vote. The question is what it would be like to vote if you were fearful for your life. In parts of the country, people were getting messages that said, "If you vote, we'll find somebody you love and take care of them." And yet they defied—defied these terrorists. It was a powerful moment in the history of freedom. People in the world got to see what it means to—for a group of people that have been downtrodden to rise up and say, "I want to be free."

Now, there's a lot of work to be done, and I'm sure there will be some opinions about what takes place during the next 9 months, as the constitution is written, and whether or not the elections move forward as smoothly as some think they should. Obviously, there's concern now I read about, that—occasionally reading, I want you to know, in the second term—that—your stories, that is—that they haven't formed a Government yet. But I take a different look. First of all, obviously, there will be a Government formed, but I think it is interesting and—to watch the process of people negotiating and worrying about this and worrying about that and people seeking out positions as to their stands on issues that will be relevant to the future of Iraq. It's a wholesome process. And it's being done in a transparent way. I mean, you've got the press corps all over them, watching every move, which is a positive example for others in the region.

And that's important. It's important for people in that region to see what is possible in a free society. And I firmly believe that the examples of Iraq and Afghanistan—I believe there will be a Palestinian state. I believe we'll be able to convince Syria to fully withdraw, or else she'll be iso-

lated—fully withdraw from Lebanon, or else she'll be isolated. I believe those examples will serve as examples for others over time. And that will lead to more peace, and that's what we want.

Yes, Carl [Carl Cannon, National Journal].

Under Secretary of State-designate Karen Hughes

Q. Mr. President, do you also think it will lead to America's reputation being restored? Earlier this week you brought Karen Hughes back at Ambassador rank to address the question of antipathy to America around the world—

The President. Yes.

Q. —particularly the Muslim world. What does that entail?

The President. Well, it entails a couple of things, Carl. It entails people understanding why we do things we do. You know, for example, there was—I think we had the image of wanting to fight Muslims—the United States stood squarely against a religion as opposed to a society which welcomes all religions. And in fact, we're fighting a handful of people, relative to the Muslim population, that wanted to—I used to say "hijack the religion."

People need to understand we're a compassionate nation, and we care deeply about suffering, regardless of where people live. And the—you know, President Clinton and President Bush 41 did a fine job of helping the world see the great compassion of America when they went on their trips in the areas ravaged by the tsunamis.

It is very important for us to have a message that counteracts some of the messages coming out of some of the Arab media—some of it coming out partly because of our strong and unwavering friendship with Israel. You know, Israel is an easy target for some of the media in the Middle East, and if you're a friend of Israel, you become a target. And since we're not going to abandon our alliance with Israel, there's a—there was some

churning in the press, and there was some unhelpful things being said. And so part of that is to make sure people understand the truth. And that is, in this particular issue, you bet we're going to stand by Israel. But we also believe the Palestinians have the capability of self-governance in a truly democratic state that will live side by side with the Israelis in peace.

And so Karen is going—one, I want to thank her for coming back from Austin. It's very hard, if you're a Texan, to abandon Austin for anywhere else, and—or Texas for anywhere else. Secondly, I applaud Secretary Rice's decision to include Karen in the process. I thought that was very wise of her to call upon Karen's talents. And Dina Powell from my office, an Egyptian American, is also going over, leaving the White House compound to work with Karen, because she believes deeply in the American experience, in American values and wants to share those values with people around the world.

And you know, I think when people also see, Carl, that we do what we say we're going to do, for example, that we helped feed the hungry and that we believe all folks should be free and that women should have an equal say in society—I think when people see we actually mean that—and then when it comes to fruition, it will help people around the world better understand our good hearts and good nature.

Yes, Ken [Ken Herman, Cox News].

Federal Government News Videos

Q. Mr. President, earlier this year, you told us you wanted your administration to cease and desist on payments to journalists to promote your agenda. You cited the need for ethical concerns and the need for a bright line between the press and the Government. Your administration continues to make the use of video news releases, which is prepackaged news stories sent to television stations, fully aware that some—or many of these stations will air them without any disclaimer that they are pro-

duced by the Government. The Comptroller General of the United States this week said that raises ethical questions. Does it raise ethical questions about the use of Government money to produce stories about the Government that wind up being aired with no disclosure that they were produced by the Government?

The President. There is a Justice Department opinion that says these pieces are within the law, so long as they're based upon facts, not advocacy. And I expect our agencies to adhere to that ruling, to that Justice Department opinion. This has been a longstanding practice of the Federal Government, to use these types of videos. The Agricultural Department, as I understand it, has been using these videos for a long period of time. The Defense Department, other Departments have been doing so. It's important that they be based upon the guidelines set out by the Justice Department.

Now, I also—I think it would be helpful if local stations then disclosed to their viewers that that's—that this was based upon a factual report, and they chose to use it. But evidently, in some cases, that's not the case. So, anyway.

Q. The administration could guarantee that's happening by including that language in the prepackaged report.

The President. Yes, I don't—oh, you mean a disclosure, "I'm George W. Bush, and I"—

Q. Well, some way to make sure it couldn't air without the disclosure that you believe is so vital.

The President. You know, Ken, there's a procedure that we're going to follow, and the local stations ought to, if there's a deep concern about that, ought to tell their viewers what they're watching.

Iran

Q. Mr. President, do you think there should be regime change in Iran? And if so, what are you prepared to do to see that happen?

The President. Richard [Richard Wolffe, Newsweek], I believe that the Iranian people ought to be allowed to freely discuss opinions, read a free press, have free votes, be able to choose amongst political parties. I believe Iran should adopt democracy. That's what I believe.

Q. Mr. President—

The President. Yes, ma'am.

Religious Displays

Q. Thank you, sir. Do you believe that nativity scenes and the Ten Commandments should continue to be displayed on Federal property or in schools?

The President. We had a display of the Ten Commandments on the statehouse grounds in Texas, and I supported that display.

Social Security Reform

Q. Mr. President, back to Social Security, if I may.

The President. Yes—

Q. You said right at the top today that you urged Members of Congress to go out and talk about the problem with their constituents.

The President. About solutions to the problem.

Q. But also to talk about solutions, and it's that part of it I want to ask about. Aren't you asking them to do something that you really haven't been willing to do yet?

The President. No, I'm interested in—first of all, I have laid out, in the State of the Union Address—I haven't looked at all previous State of the Union Addresses, but I think I'm the first President ever to say, "All options are on the table," and named a series of options. I think. Now, maybe if somebody could go back and find out—if you've got some idle time on your hand, you might want to go read previous State of the Union Addresses and see if that's true.

I don't believe Members should go write a bill, but I do believe a Member should

start discussing ideas with constituencies about how to solve the problem, as opposed to blocking ideas—to say, "Here are some ideas," and come back and present them. That's what's happening, by the way. There's a lot of Members are talking about different concepts. I've called a lot of them into the White House compound; I've listened to them. There's a variety of ideas, and that's positive. I view that as a positive sign that Members of Congress, one, take the problem seriously—I thought it was helpful yesterday when the United States Senate said that Social Security is a serious problem that requires a permanent solution.

And now it's time for people, when they get back from Easter, having talked to different constituency groups, to come back and sit down and start sharing ideas about how to move the process forward. And my pledge is that I will not take somebody's idea and use it as a political weapon against them. That's what's changed in this debate. In other words, the Social Security—they used to call it the third rail of American politics, because when you talked about it, you got singed, at the minimum. And it's now time to talk about it in a serious way, to come up with a permanent solution.

Yes, Jackson [David Jackson, Dallas Morning News].

Q. Mr. President, you talked earlier about going—

The President. I can't call on Herman and not on Jackson. [Laughter]

Iran

Q. Thank you. You talked about going to the Security Council if Iran turns down this EU-3 deal. Iran says they're not making nuclear weapons. Are we looking at a potential military confrontation with Iran?

The President. You know that we've got a lot of diplomacy, you know. I mean, there's a lot of diplomacy in this issue. And that's why I was so pleased to be able to participate with our friends France and Great Britain and Germany to say to the

Iranians, “We speak with common voice, and we share suspicions because of your past behavior. And the best way to ensure that you do not develop a nuclear weapon is for you to have no enrichment of plutonium—have no highly enriched uranium program or plutonium program that could lead to a weapon.” That’s what we’ve said.

And we’ve just started the process. We just had the discussion. How long ago was I in Europe? Maybe 10 days or so, 2 weeks? About 2 weeks? I mean, it takes a while for things to happen in the world, David. I mean, I know there’s a certain impatience with a never-ending news cycle. But things don’t happen on—necessarily overnight the way some would like them, you know. They just—solve this issue, and we go to the next issue. There’s a certain patience required in order to achieve a diplomatic objective. And our diplomatic objective is to continue working with our friends to make it clear to Iran we speak with a single voice.

Listen, whoever thought about modernizing this room deserves a lot of credit. [Laughter] It’s like there’s very little oxygen in here anymore. [Laughter] And so for the sake of a healthy press corps and a healthy President, I’m going to end the

press conference. But I want to thank you for giving me a chance to come by and visit. I wish you all—genuinely wish you all a happy Easter holiday with you and your family.

Thank you.

Q. Can I get that followup now?

The President. What?

Q. Can I get that followup now? [Laughter]

NOTE: The President’s news conference began at 10:15 a.m. in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Paul Martin of Canada; President Vicente Fox of Mexico; Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi of Italy; Robert C. Pozen, chairman, MFS Investment Management; Gen. George W. Casey, Jr., USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq; Prime Minister Bertie Ahern of Ireland; Paula, Catherine, Donna, Claire, and Gemma McCartney, and Bridgeen Hagans, sisters and fiancée of Robert McCartney, who was murdered in Belfast, Ireland, on January 30; and authors Joseph J. Ellis and David McCullough. A reporter referred to Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams.

Remarks Following Discussions With Maronite Patriarch of Antioch Nasrallah Boutros Cardinal Sfeir of Lebanon

March 16, 2005

President Bush. Your Eminence, welcome. It is my honor to welcome you and your distinguished delegation to the Oval Office. We’re—thank you for your conversation.

His Eminence and I discussed, of course, Lebanon and our deep desire for Lebanon to be a truly free country—free where people can worship the way they choose to, free where people can speak their mind, free where political parties can flourish, a

country based upon free elections. And I assured His Eminence that United States policy is to work with friends and allies to insist that Syria completely leave Lebanon, Syria take all her troops out of Lebanon, Syria take her intelligence services out of Lebanon, so that the election process will be free and fair.

His Eminence is a man of God. He brings great prestige of the church to the Oval Office. And I’m proud you’re here,