

Crocker during my time as President because he's been—fulfilled a very important mission for the United States, and that is the Ambassador to Pakistan, where he served ably and served well. And I'm confident I picked the right man to be our new Ambassador in Iraq.

The Ambassador will follow General David Petraeus into Iraq. So now we've got a new military commander and a new head of our diplomatic mission there. These are two competent individuals who will help us implement our new strategy in the country of Iraq. And that new strategy has said that we're going to help this young Iraqi Government be able to sustain itself and defend itself by enforcing security in the capital city.

I was telling the Ambassador that I had a visit today with Prime Minister Maliki via secure SVTS. I was pleased that he's meeting benchmarks that he had set out for his Government. One of the benchmarks was to move Iraqi troops into the city of Baghdad—troops that will be complemented by our own troops. He is meeting those obligations. A second such benchmark is that he would change the rules of engagement so that criminals, regardless of their religion, would be brought to justice in equal fashion. He is meeting that benchmark. Thirdly, he passed a budget, of which \$10 billion is available for reconstruction. He said he would do that; the budget has been passed; he has met that benchmark. And that's good news for the Iraqi people, and it should give people here in the United States confidence that this Government knows its responsibilities and

is following through on those responsibilities.

And so the Ambassador heads into a really important assignment, carrying a message of hope to the Iraqi people that the United States wants them to succeed, and a message of urgency to the Iraqi Government that our patience is not unlimited and that we expect that Government to perform. And as I said, I was able to tell the Prime Minister how much, how closely we're watching, that we've got a good, new man coming as Ambassador, and that we appreciate the fact that he's beginning to meet the benchmarks that he set out for his people.

Mr. Ambassador, Godspeed, and thank you.

Ambassador-designate Crocker. Thank you, sir. Pleased to have your confidence.

The President. Thank you.

By the way, we're looking forward to quick Senate confirmation. He's had his hearing. And of course, when I call him "Ambassador," it's not Ambassador to Iraq—it's Ambassador-designee to Iraq—but Ambassador now in Pakistan. And the Senate needs to confirm him as quickly as possible so he can join General Petraeus and do the job.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:43 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gen. David H. Petraeus, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq; and Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki of Iraq.

The President's Radio Address *February 17, 2007*

Good morning. Today I would like to talk to you about an urgent priority for

our Nation: confronting the rising costs of health care.

In my State of the Union Address, I invited Democrats and Republicans in Congress to work with my administration to reform our health care system. In the past few weeks, I've discussed my health care proposals with citizens across our country. Next week, I'll visit a hospital in Tennessee to hear directly from people who do not have access to basic, affordable health insurance. I will also meet with a panel of experts at the White House to discuss how we can build a vibrant market where individuals can buy their own health insurance.

The problem with our current system is clear: Health care costs are rising rapidly, more than twice as fast as wages. These rising costs are driving up the price of health insurance and making it harder for working families to afford coverage. These rising costs also make it harder for small businesses to offer health coverage to their employees. We must address these rising costs so that more Americans can afford basic private health insurance.

One of the most promising ways to make private coverage more affordable and accessible is to reform the Tax Code. Today, the Tax Code unfairly penalizes people who do not get health insurance through their job. If you buy health insurance on your own, you pay much more after taxes than if you get it through your job. I proposed to end this unfair bias in the Tax Code by creating a standard tax deduction for every American who has health insurance, whether they get it through their job or on their own.

For example, every family that has health insurance would get a \$15,000 deduction on their taxes. This deduction would also apply to payroll taxes so that even those who pay no income taxes would benefit. Americans deserve a level playing field. If you're self-employed, a farmer, a rancher, or an employee at a small business who buys health insurance on your own, you should get the same tax advantage as those who get their health insurance through their job at a big business.

At the same time, I proposed Affordable Choices grants to help States provide coverage for the uninsured. Governors across our country have put forward innovative ideas for health care reform. Under my proposal, States that make basic private health insurance available to all their citizens would receive Federal funds to help them provide this coverage to the poor and the sick. Next week, the Nation's Governors will come to Washington to discuss challenges facing their States. I've asked my Secretary of Health and Human Services, Mike Leavitt, to meet with the Governors and discuss ways we can work together to help reduce the number of uninsured Americans.

Reforming health care is a bipartisan priority. Earlier this week, I was pleased to receive a letter from 10 Senators—5 Democrats and 5 Republicans—who expressed their desire to work together on health care reform. I look forward to discussing our proposals and hearing more about their ideas. I appreciate the commitment of this bipartisan group to work with my administration, and I will continue to reach across party lines to enact common-sense health care reforms.

From my conversations with Democrats and Republicans, it is clear both parties recognize that strengthening health care for all Americans is one of our most important responsibilities. I am confident that if we put politics aside, we can find practical ways to improve our private health care system and help millions of Americans enjoy better care, new choices, and healthier lives.

Thank you for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at 8 a.m. on February 16 in the Cabinet Room at the White House for broadcast at 10:06 a.m. on February 17. The transcript was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on February 16, but was embargoed for release until the broadcast. The Office of the Press

Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of this address.

Remarks Honoring President George Washington's 275th Birthday in
Mount Vernon, Virginia
February 19, 2007

Thank you all for coming. Laura and I are honored to be with you in this historic place on this special anniversary. I feel right at home here. After all, this is the home of the first George W. [Laughter] I thank President Washington for welcoming us today. He doesn't look a day over 275 years old. [Laughter]

We're really glad you're here. I look out and see a lot of the kids who are here today. When I was your age, I was a little fellow from Midland, Texas, and my grandmother brought me here. And then Laura and I brought our daughters here. And the reason I bring this up, this is a good place for Americans to come and bring your families. And we welcome you here today.

You know, we're celebrating around the country President's Day, but the folks that work here call it Washington's birthday. We've been celebrating this holiday for more than two centuries, and this morning we continue this tradition by honoring a man who was our first President, the Father of our Country, and a champion of liberty.

I appreciate Gay Gaines and the—regent of Mount Vernon Ladies Association. I appreciate Jim Rees, who is the executive director. I thank Togo West, who is the chairman of the Mount Vernon Advisory Committee. I appreciate the military who have joined us. General, thank you for being here today with us. I thank the members who work hard to make sure that Mount Vernon is preserved for the future. And I thank all of—you all for being here.

You know, George Washington was born about 80 miles down the river from Mount

Vernon in the year 1732. As a young man, he went West and explored the frontier, and it changed his life. As he grew older, he became convinced that America had a great westward destiny as a nation of free people, independent of the empires of Europe. George Washington became the central figure in our Nation's struggle for independence. At age 43, he took command of the Continental Army. At age 51, he was a triumphant hero of the war. And at age 57, he was the obvious and only choice to be the first President of the United States.

With the advantage of hindsight, it is easy to take George Washington's successes for granted and to assume that all those events were destined to unfold as they did. Well, the truth is far different. America's path to freedom was long, and it was hard, and the outcome was really never certain. Honoring George Washington's life requires us to remember the many challenges that he overcame and the fact that American history would have turned out very differently without his steady leadership.

On the field of battle, Washington's forces were facing a mighty empire, and the odds against them were overwhelming. The ragged Continental Army lost more battles than it won, suffered waves of desertions, and stood on the brink of disaster many times. Yet George Washington's calm hand and determination kept the cause of independence and the principles of our declaration alive.

He rallied his troops to brilliant victories at Trenton and Princeton. He guided them through the terrible winter at Valley Forge.