

Remarks Following a Meeting With Cochairs of the President's
Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors
March 7, 2007

I am concerned that our soldiers and their families are not getting the treatment that they deserve, having volunteered to defend our country. Any report of medical neglect will be taken seriously by this administration, and I'm confident by the Congress, and we will address problems quickly.

I've asked two of America's fine public servants, Senator Dole and Secretary Shalala, to chair a Commission that will analyze our health care both at the Defense Department and at the Veterans Department, to ensure that not only our soldiers but their families have got complete confidence in the Government's upholding its responsibility to treat those who have been wounded.

I am concerned that there may be flaws in the system between when a soldier is on the battlefield, through the Defense Department, through the Veterans Administration, and finally to the community. I can't think of two better people to analyze the situation and to make recommendations—

two people to lead a Commission of probably nine people—and that would be Senator Dole, who is himself a veteran, and a wounded veteran at that, a former distinguished Senator, a man who knows Washington well. But more importantly, he knows the kind of questions to ask. And Secretary Shalala, who is an expert on health. She lived after 8 years in President Clinton's administration; she knows what to look for; she knows the questions to ask.

And I'm confident that this Commission will bring forth the truth. And as I assured the Chairmen, I am confident that there will be a quick response to any problems that you may find. So I can't thank you enough for taking time and to serve your nation once again. God bless. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:12 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to former Sen. Robert J. Dole; and former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna E. Shalala.

Interview With Natalia Orozco of RCN TV of Colombia
March 7, 2007

President's Upcoming Visit to Central and South America

Ms. Orozco. Thank you, Mr. President, for this time with RCN TV Colombia.

The President. Thank you. I'm really looking forward to going to Bogota.

Ms. Orozco. Thank you, Mr. President. I have to start by asking you this. You're arriving to Bogota when President Bush—President Uribe is facing a deep crisis because of—we've got a political scandal.

Does this affect the support, the confidence that you have always expressed to him?

The President. No. As a matter of fact, I've been very impressed by how he's handled this latest issue. President Uribe is a very strong leader; he's committed to justice; he believes in fairness; and he's a man who has proven he can get things done. And so my confidence in the President is very high. And I'm looking forward to expressing that confidence about—to not only

the people of Colombia but also to the people in my Congress.

Plan Colombia

Ms. Orozco. Mr. President, \$4 billion invested in Plan Colombia, but the drug keeps coming to the United States, and the leader of the guerrillas remains at large. Why do you support a second phase of the same Plan Colombia?

The President. Well, thank you for that question. First of all, we've had a lot of successes in working together. I recognize there's still a lot of *drogas* coming here. Part of that has to do with, we still use drugs, and we've got to do a better job of convincing people to stop using drugs. But we've also stopped a lot of drugs from coming. And therefore, I can argue to the Congress and the people that there has been a lot of notable successes. And the truth of the matter is, Colombia has changed to the better as a result of the Plan Colombia. There's still bad activities going on, but it's a lot less than it was before.

Colombia-U.S. Free Trade Agreement

Ms. Orozco. Mr. President, public opinion in Colombia, as well as in the U.S. Congress, is divided about the free trade agreement. Will you be ready to reopen those negotiations in order to make it pass?

The President. No, I don't think we want to reopen the negotiations. We've had good, strong negotiations between our respective parties. Obviously, if there's some fine-tuning necessary—but we've negotiated good agreements, and I'm going to have to work hard with our Congress, and the President is going to have to work hard to convince the people of Colombia that trade is fair. And if I were a farmer in Colombia or a small-business person in Colombia, I'd want to be in a position to be able to sell my products into a large market like the United States.

And these trade fights are always tough, and I want to make sure, though, that we

work to have a world that trades freely and fairly, because it's the best way to eliminate poverty.

President's Upcoming Visit to Central and South America

Ms. Orozco. Are you concerned about the influence that President Chavez is gaining in the region? As many experts have said, is your trip also an answer to that?

The President. No, my trip is a chance to tell the people of Colombia and Uruguay and Brazil and Guatemala and Mexico that the United States cares deeply about the human condition. My budget this year has got—or last year has \$1.6 billion of bilateral assistance. Much of that money is spent on social justice programs, programs like education and health care.

You know, oftentimes, people really don't understand the United States, and my trip is to really explain to people that we believe in education for all; we believe in human rights and human dignity; we believe in prosperity. And the people of this country have been very generous in their help and support to people.

Ms. Orozco. But are you concerned about the influence of Mr. Chavez in the region?

The President. Each country is going to have to make up their own mind about the systems of government. To the extent that people feel like they can nationalize companies, I think is a mistake. I'm very much in favor of open systems, free press, the right for people to assemble and express their mind.

My trip, however, is all aimed at explaining to the people of South and Latin America that good foreign policy for the United States is to promote a prosperous and peaceful neighborhood.

Cuba

Ms. Orozco. Mr. President, today, have you the feeling that the policy applies to Cuba has done any good for the Cubans in the island?

The President. I think the worse thing that's happened for the Cuban people on the island is the fact that they're not free. And my position is, it is important for people to be free, and that if there is a transition to a new way in Cuba, it's got to be decided by the Cuban people. They should be allowed to freely assemble; they should be allowed to speak their minds; there ought to be strong rule of law. My position has been, and will continue to be, that a free Cuba is what is necessary for the people of Cuba.

Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)/American Hostages

Ms. Orozco. Thank you, Mr. President. There are three Americans held by the FARC now. Do you think President Uribe should achieve the humanitarian exchange, or should he insist in the military rescue?

The President. I trust President Uribe's judgment. And my message isn't to President Uribe; my message is to the FARC, and that is to give up these hostages. You're making it clear to the world the kind of people you are when you take innocent life and hold them hostage. And it's very sad for the families here in America. I'm deeply concerned about their fate.

War on Terror

Ms. Orozco. Mr. President, how long is the United States willing for the extradition of the narco-paramilitary terrorists that remains in Colombia, because they are part of the peace process?

The President. How long will we wait for the extradition process?

Ms. Orozco. Right.

The President. I'll work with the President on that. That will be a subject matter in my private discussions with President Uribe.

Ms. Orozco. Mr. President, do you think that with the military aid, President Uribe, with the help of United States, is going to be able to win the war against terrorism in Colombia?

The President. I think that a war against terror can be won by firm resolve, plus a alternative to repression, kidnaping, murder, and drugs. And one thing that President Uribe has done is laid out a vision. A lot of people have come in from the jungles, as you know, because they realize there's a better way of life.

We all have a lot of work to do in our respective countries to make sure every person has a good education and good, decent health care. But when people realize there is a better tomorrow, it's much easier for a man of peace, like Uribe, to deal with a difficult problem that he inherited.

Colombia-U.S. Relations

Ms. Orozco. President Bush, what is the best memory that you have of all this time working with Colombia, so close, having Colombia as one of your main allies?

The President. You know, I think it's the fact that I have a very honest relationship with President Uribe. He loves his country. He is a very strong proponent of Colombia and the people of Colombia. We don't agree on every single issue, of course, but I do respect his courage, and I respect the fact that he's done a good job in office. And I'm really looking forward to going back to Colombia. I've been, as President, once before. I can't wait to come back, this time, to your beautiful capital city.

Ms. Orozco. Thank you, Mr. President, for your time. We wish you a wonderful and successful trip.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 11:45 a.m. in the Map Room at the White House for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to President Alvaro Uribe Velez of Colombia. Ms. Orozco referred to President Hugo Chavez Frias of Venezuela. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Interview With Enrique Gratas of Univision March 7, 2007

Verdict in the Trial of I. Lewis Libby

Mr. Gratas. Thank you very much, Mr. President, for this opportunity to talk about the trip and other issues. Yesterday somebody very familiar to the administration, Lewis “Scooter” Libby, was found guilty of the charges of perjury, lying, obstruction of justice. What is the impact of your administration of this verdict, or your personal feelings?

The President. First, this was a very serious matter. A jury of his peers analyzed the data very seriously and rendered a verdict that must be respected. Secondly, I personally am sad. I’m sad for Mr. Libby and his family. There was a sense of sadness to hear the verdict read for me. And finally, this is an ongoing legal matter, there is more to be done in the courts, and therefore, at this time, it’s inappropriate for the administration to be commenting beyond just what you asked me.

Mr. Gratas. Thank you. Some Senators, one in particular, Mr. Kennedy, is suggesting that you would pardon him. What’s your idea?

The President. Oh, I think—as I say, there’s an ongoing legal matter. There’s a lot of—if you listen carefully, the lawyers are talking about different avenues to approach this particular case. And so I’m pretty much going to stay out of it until the course—the case has finally run its final—the course it’s going to take.

President’s Upcoming Visit to Central and South America

Mr. Gratas. Thank you. About your trip to Latin America: Some critics think that the administration, your administration has neglected—or prior administrations have neglected our Latin American neighbors. This is your fourth trip to Latin America.

The President. Yes, sir.

Mr. Gratas. What do you plan to accomplish?

The President. Well, first of all, I think I plan to accomplish, one—the main thing is to kind of disabuse people of the notion that America doesn’t care about the neighborhood. And it troubles me to think that some people in our neighborhood believe we don’t care. We do—I care deeply, personally, about Latin America, and our country does. And what I’m going to do is remind people, when I go down, that the American people have been very generous on bilateral aid. We’ve increased the aid since I’ve been President from \$800 million a year to \$1.6 billion. And there’s ongoing projects. And the important thing for people to understand is that the aid primarily goes for social justice programs—for education programs or health programs.

And the second thing I want to talk to people about is that—the importance of trade. The United States is a big market, and if you’re a poor farmer in parts of Central or South America, it seems like it makes sense to be able to sell your product into this market. Why? Because you may get a better price, and it means you can make a better living. And so trade, in my judgment, is positive, and it’s a way to help people be lifted out of poverty.

To summarize, a prosperous and peaceful Latin America is in the interest of the United States.

War Protests

Mr. Gratas. Thank you. I’m sure you’re aware of some protests in the countries that you will visit, mainly because of the war in Iraq. Are you concerned about those demonstrations?

The President. I am proud to be going to a part of the world where people can demonstrate, where people can express their minds. It happens quite frequently