

Remarks at a Republican National Committee Gala May 10, 2007

The President. Thank you all. Thanks for coming. Please be seated, unless, of course, you don't have a chair. [Laughter] I'm glad you're here. And I'm glad I'm here with you, and I thank you. Thanks for coming; thanks for supporting the Republican Party. Here's our mission: Our mission is to keep the White House in 2008 and retake the Senate and the House. And you're helping, and you're helping a lot, and I really appreciate it.

I appreciate my friend, Senator Mel Martinez, for being the general chairman of the Republican National Committee. You know, I believe that he is the first RNC chairman to speak English as a second language. [Laughter] Some people think I'm the first President who can make the same claim. [Laughter]

But I'm proud to be with Mel and Michael Duncan and Elliott Broidy and all the good folks who are helping make sure that we're ready to run a vibrant and active campaign in 2008.

I wish Laura were here. No, I know it, I know. I'm proud of her. She is a gracious, lovely person. And I am a lucky man to have had her by my side during this fantastic experience of being your President. She sends her love, and she sends her best. I want to—yes, I love her too. Yes, she's good. [Laughter]

Audience member. I love you too.

The President. Thank you. Well, it's one of these kind of interactive crowds. [Laughter]

I've learned something about how you win campaigns. I've been through a few, myself. I have found that if you stand for something, the people will believe in you. If you stand on principles and enunciate that which you believe, the people will follow. And so as we head into campaign season next year, it's very important for the Republican Party to enunciate that which

we believe, to stand for something, not be one of these parties that takes a focus group to tell us what to believe but to tell people what we believe and what those beliefs are, beliefs etched in our soul.

I believe that everybody has the right to be free. I believe freedom is universal. I believe this country needs a strong national defense. I believe that the best way to encourage economic vitality so that people can realize the American Dream is through less government and more entrepreneurship. I believe that the government ought to trust in the judgment of ordinary citizens. I believe that technologies can help transform the world in a better way. And I believe when we find somebody who hurts, we ought to encourage faith-based and community groups to surround them with love. That's what I believe.

These are difficult times for the United States. These are troubling times because we are a nation at war. I wish I could report that was not the case, but it is the case. And the most solemn obligation of government is to protect the American people from harm. Our most solemn duty is to use all our powers to protect you from further attack.

I must tell you that my attitude toward the world changed dramatically on September the 11th, 2001. It was a day that affected our Nation deeply, and it affected me as President. And I vowed on that day and the days following that attack that I wouldn't tire, I wouldn't weary, that I would use all my capacities to rally the American people and the assets of this country to protect you.

The enemy we face is fearless. They're mean. They know new—they know no boundaries of civilization as we know it, see. They kill to impose their will. It's hard for Americans to believe that we face such

evil people, but we do. And the fundamental question facing this country is that we—will we have the will to face the threats of the 21st century?

I have put forth a strategy that does protect America. In the short term, we will pursue the enemy wherever we find them. It is best to defeat the enemy overseas so we don't have to face them here in America.

And so the war on terror is being fought on many fronts: in Afghanistan, in Southeast Asia, the Horn of Africa, and of course, the Middle East. In the long term, the best way to defeat an enemy that believes in a hateful ideology is to support the spread of an ideology that's hopeful, an ideology that lifts people's lives, an ideology that can defeat those who try to prey on innocent young people and convince them to murder. And that ideology is the ideology of liberty.

We're implementing this strategy, and of course, the debate now centers on Iraq. And it's a tough fight. But I believe it's a necessary fight to protect the American people. There's been some progress. If you think about how far Iraq has come in a relatively short period of time, it's historic. The people there in that country have gone from life under a brutal tyrant who was an enemy of the United States to a society where 12 million Iraqis voted for one of the most modern constitutions in the history of the Middle East, a society where people were given a chance to express their will at the polls and elect a government.

A thinking enemy, however, realized that progress was being made and used their brutal ways to try to foment sectarian violence. The enemy we face in Iraq is a multifaceted enemy. But the enemy that's causing the car bombs, the enemy that is causing the spectacular deaths of the innocent, is Al Qaida, the very same people that launched the attacks that killed nearly 3,000 citizens on our soul—soil.

I was confronted with a choice. I had a decision to make. I told people that, you

know, had they—had I been one of the people that answered a poll last fall, I would have said I disapprove of what was happening in Iraq. It was not satisfactory to me of what was taking place. The sectarian violence that was deep in that society was looking like it was going to make it impossible for this young democracy to survive. You can't have your capital city as a place where murderers stalk innocent people and expect for a young democracy to be able to get its roots and to grow.

One choice was to pull back and hope that the violence wouldn't spill out across the country and out across the Middle East. The other choice that I made, in consultation with our military folks, was rather than pull back, to send reinforcements into the capital of that country, all aiming to give this young democracy an opportunity to do the reconciliation work necessary to have a country that can defend itself, govern itself, sustain itself, serves—serve as an example to other moderate people, and be an ally in the war on terror. And that's exactly what the policy is we're now following.

I asked a new general, General David Petraeus, to implement the policy. Our goal is to help the Iraqis secure their population, especially in Baghdad. The operation is still in its early stages. The fourth of five groups of soldiers we're sending into Iraq have arrived; the fifth is on its way. In other words, the operational plan that David Petraeus explained to the United States Congress is still being implemented. We don't have the full complement of troops that I told the American people we would send into Baghdad.

And yet there's some positive signs. One positive sign is that sectarian murders are down substantially, even before all our troops have arrived to help the Iraqi citizens. Sectarian murders are down. There's—people are gaining confidence, slowly but surely, in a government, because security is improving, and, therefore, there's more tips, more information being passed

on to Iraqi forces and American forces so that we can help that society have the security necessary to do the hard work. We've had successful operations against extremists, whether they be Sunni or Shi'a. We're making progress.

And now we're in a debate here in Washington, DC. And it's a debate, as you know, about whether or not to fund our troops. I think it's very important that Congress have an honest debate. And I don't question the patriotism of anyone who is expressing their views. But as I made clear to Members of Congress, a supplemental bill—a war spending bill that mandated withdrawals by an arbitrary date—or a bill that imposes restrictive conditions on our commanders, or a bill that would spend billions of dollars unrelated to the war was unacceptable, and that's why I vetoed the bill.

I will continue to reach out to Democrats and Republicans to come up with a way to get this money to our troops as quickly as possible. We're not going to agree on every issue, but we don't want to put the men and women who wear our uniform in the midst of a Washington, DC, debate. These troops need the money, and Congress needs to get it to them.

If I didn't think it was worthy, if I didn't think it was necessary, if I didn't realize and believe that it's important to defeat Al Qaida in Iraq, I wouldn't have our young men and women there in the first place. I believe this is a necessary action to protect our country.

Much of the debate doesn't focus on the consequences of failure. There's a lot of talk about withdrawal, but it's important for our fellow citizens to understand what the consequences would be if we fail, if we left before the job was done. There would be a vacuum in the—in Iraq, and in that vacuum would flow extremists. Murderers and killers would take advantage of the lack of security. That violence could spill out across all Iraq. I believe there's a good chance the violence would spill out all

across the Middle East. I know that people would take heart at the fact that the United States of America didn't keep its commitment to the moderates and the young—this young democracy.

It would embolden Al Qaida. Al Qaida has clearly stated—the enemy that attacked America has clearly stated that they seek safe haven in Iraq, that they want to drive us from Iraq so they can have a safe haven from which to plan and plot other attacks. I know that the Iranians would see that we left before the job was done, and that would embolden them. One of the great dangers facing our children, one of the great dangers facing civilization, is an Iran with a nuclear weapon. It's important that we succeed in Iraq and send a clear message to the people.

I don't want it to be said 50 years from now: "What happened to America in 2007? How come they forgot the lessons of September the 11th? How come they couldn't see the impending dangers facing a generation of Americans?" I want you to know I see the impending dangers. I understand the consequences of this historic moment. And we will succeed in Iraq.

I just want you to know our foreign policy is more than just the spread of liberty and the protection of our country. I firmly believe that to whom much is given, much is required. It's a principle on which I try to operate. It's a principle on which I make decisions. I understand the consequences of a pandemic like HIV/AIDS on the continent of Africa. The United States of America must boldly lead, must not shirk from our duty, and must help people wherever we find suffering, to the best of our ability.

I'm proud to announce that since we have put together the Presidential initiative on HIV/AIDS in Africa, there have been 850,000 people receiving antiretroviral drugs, up from 50,000, 3 years ago.

People have questioned: Is it a necessary action to take? I say it's necessary. I say

it's necessary to help relieve human suffering. I also say it's necessary to make sure our soul is strong. The spirit of America remains intact. Our foreign policy is robust, it is aggressive, and it will lead to peace—the peace we all want.

At home, we're coming down to a campaign next year. A big issue, of course, is going to be the economy. I'm looking forward to talking about the economy. This economy has been through a lot. You might remember the recent economic history of the United States. We went through a recession. We had the terrorist attack. We had corporate scandals. We had people doubting our capacity to grow our economy. And yet the economy has been robust. We've created 7.8 million jobs over the past 4 years; unemployment is low; inflation is low; wages are rising; the entrepreneurial spirit is strong in America. And the question is, how do we keep it that way?

I told you, one of the core principles on which I operate is: I believe we ought to trust the people of the United States to make their own decisions. And perhaps the best way to exhibit that trust is to let you keep more of your own money. When you have more money to spend, this economy benefits. And there's a debate here in Washington, DC. There's a constant struggle about who best can spend the American people's money. Well, I made up my mind a long time ago when I convinced the Congress to cut the taxes on everybody who pays taxes. The tax relief is working.

And now the question is, are we going to let that tax relief expire? My answer is, absolutely not. We need to make the tax relief permanent.

Oh, I know you'll hear them say in Washington and you'll hear them campaigning, listen: "All we've got to do is tax the rich to balance the budget." That's the same old mantra they trot out about every campaign cycle. The problem is, it doesn't work that way in Washington. Oh yes, they'll tax you. But if you're middle class, you better watch out. See, they can't raise

enough money to meet their spending ambitions. They'll raise the taxes, but when they do, they'll figure out new ways to spend your money.

The best way to grow this economy and fix this deficit is to keep taxes low so the economy grows, which yields more tax revenues, and be wise about how we spend your money, be fiscally sound.

I put forth a budget that eliminates the Federal deficit within the next 5 years because we set priorities. And the top priority of this Government ought to be, make sure our troops have that which is necessary to protect the American people.

The Democrats pass budgets. They harken back to those old days of tax and spend. And I believe when it comes down to it, when they hear the clear differences of our points of view and the principles by which we make decisions, the American people don't want to return to the days of tax and spend.

I want to talk to you a little bit about education. Education is a vital issue for the United States. It's a vital issue to make sure that we're a competitive nation in the 21st century. If we don't educate our children now, the United States of America will have a hard time being the economic leader of the world. I'm an advocate of public schools. You might remember, I was once the Governor of the State of Texas. [Applause] I'm glad they let you into town. [Laughter]

I used to say this as Governor: Education is to a State what national defense is to the Federal Government. In that statement, there's some interesting principles. One, I believe in local control of schools. I believe it is essential that the governance of schools take place not in Washington but locally. I also believe, however, in this principle: that if we spend money, we want to see results, and we've got to ask about the results. We spend a fair amount of money here in Washington, DC, a lot of money on the schoolchildren, particularly the poor

schoolchildren. And that's fine, and that's noble, and it is necessary.

And so I went to Congress and said: Listen, we'll spend the money, but why don't we start asking some important questions, like, can you read—[laughter]—can you write; can you add; and can you subtract? I believe in measurement. And I believe in measurement not because I want to punish anybody, but I believe in measuring so we can correct problems early, before it's too late. That piece of legislation is called the No Child Left Behind Act. The gap—the achievement gap is closing in America. Congress needs to reauthorize that good piece of legislation.

I'm a strong believer in technology. I believe technology will help improve American lives, and I strongly believe that technology will enable us to become less dependent on foreign oil. Now I believe that we can explore for oil and gas in environmentally friendly ways, and we should. But I am deeply concerned about our dependence on oil. It creates a national security issue. Plain way of putting it is that, not everybody we buy oil from likes us. [Laughter] Having a dependence on foreign oil is an economic security issue. When the demand for crude oil goes up in the developing world, it causes the price of gasoline to go up here in America. Dependence on oil creates an environmental issue.

So I put forth an innovative way of dealing with our dependence on oil, and that is to promote alternative forms of energy to power our cars. I believe it makes sense to encourage automobiles to be driven by ethanol derived from corn, for example. I want American farmers growing energy for American people. I believe strongly that we ought to be spending your taxpayers' money to come up with alternative fuel sources, like switchgrass. Is it possible? You bet it's possible. It's called cellulosic ethanol.

One of these days, I can't wait to go out West where it's a little dry and see all the switchgrass farmers that are growing product necessary to produce ethanol so

you can drive it in your cars, and we become less dependent on foreign sources of oil. It's coming. And the role of the United States has got to be to lead and to promote new technologies.

We can do a good job, by the way, of using some of our power sources here in America by developing clean coal technologies. We ought to be promoting nuclear power that is safe, so that we can be responsible stewards of the environment and make sure you got electricity supplies as we head out into the 21st century. No, we got a comprehensive energy plan that makes a lot of sense, that is going to call upon the ingenuity of the American people and make sure this economy remains the leader in the world.

I want to talk about health care. There's a principle involved in health care I want to share with you, and that is we want consumers making decisions. We want patients and their doctors making decisions, not insurance agents and not the Federal Government, when it comes to health care.

I called for reform in the Tax Code. I believe there ought to be a standard tax deduction for health insurance like there's a standard tax deduction for dependents. And the reason why I believe that is because I believe it's important for us to encourage the development of an individual market, so individuals can buy good health care, so there can be more risk spread across more people, so there's a vibrant market for people to be able to—if you're not employed, or if you're a small-business owner, that you can go—or employed without insurance—you can find a product that will give you that security.

What I don't want to do is encourage the Federal Government to run the health care system. I think that would be a huge mistake. I think it's important to promote policies that say the consumer matters when it comes to buying health care needs. And that's exactly what this administration is doing.

By the way, there's some other practical things we can do. We can promote health savings accounts, which all empower the individual that says, we trust you. Here's a way for you to have health insurance, and we trust you to make the decisions. We can expose prices. I don't know how many of you ever shopped for medical care. I know I haven't. I don't remember asking anybody: "Let me see the lists. How do you price your product relative to the neighbor?" I've never seen a hospital say, "Well, here's my prices compared to my—to the hospital down the road." There needs to be more transparency when it comes to pricing, so consumers can make rational choices.

One thing is for certain: We've got to make sure, if you want health care to be available and affordable, to have good policies that counter this notion of driving good docs out of business. What I'm telling you is there's too many junk lawsuits suing too many doctors, and we need to have medical liability reform in the United States of America.

I hope you get a sense of the philosophy that I think needs to be inherent in good policy. And that is, we trust you, and we trust in the ingenuity of the American people. We believe the future is brighter. We're putting good policy in place to encourage that bright future.

I've got another job, by the way, and it's to make sure one branch of our Government is sound and solid and reflects a philosophy that I campaigned on. And it's this: Judges should strictly interpret the law and not legislate from the bench. And I

will continue to name—[applause]—continue to name good, solid judges that adhere to that principle.

You know, people ask me all the time, "Do you enjoy being the President?" And my answer is, absolutely. I love being your President. I like being the Commander in Chief. I enjoy being the educator in chief. I like talking about what we believe in because I firmly believe the philosophy we believe in is best for America. I believe it is the type of philosophy that inspires people. I believe it's a philosophy that inherits the greatness of our economy. I believe that we are the party of the entrepreneur. I believe we're the party of the doer, the dreamer, the people that work. I believe we're the party of low taxes. And I know we're the party of strong national defense to protect the United States of America.

And so I appreciate you coming tonight. Thanks for giving me a chance to share with you some ideas. But more importantly, thank you for contributing of your hard-earned money to make sure that this great Republican Party is ready for the task ahead.

May God bless our country. May God bless you. Thanks for coming.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:02 p.m. at the D.C. Armory. In his remarks, he referred to Michael Duncan, chairman, Republican National Committee; Elliott Broidy, chairman and chief executive officer, Broidy Capital Management; and Gen. David H. Petraeus, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq.

Commencement Address at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania May 11, 2007

Thank you. Go ahead and be seated. Thank you. Thanks for coming. Thank you all. Please be seated. Thank you for the

warm welcome. Archabbot Douglas, Your Excellency, Jim and Mary Towey, members of the faculty, members of the clergy,