

We think of your comrades who have been wounded. And this Nation pledges that we will give them all the care and all the support they need to recover.

We think of all your families back home. I know many of you have a sweetheart who misses you, or a daughter who longs for her dad, or a mom who worries about you day and night. For many of you, it won't be your first holiday away, and that certainly doesn't make it easier. So I'm going to give you an order: When you get out of here, call home or e-mail home, you tell your families you love them, and you tell the Commander in Chief came by to thank them for their sacrifice along with yours.

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. Thanks for coming by to let me say hello. Thanks for serving the United States of America. They ask me what I'm going to miss as the President. I'll tell you what I'm going to miss: being the Commander in Chief of such a fabulous

group of folks. May God bless you, and God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:10 p.m. at Al Faw Palace. In his remarks, he referred to Lt. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq, who introduced the President; Lt. Gen. Lloyd Austin, USA, commander, Multi-National Corps—Iraq; Christine Barnes, wife of U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan C. Crocker; Command Sgt. Maj. Lawrence Wilson, USA, Multi-National Force—Iraq; Command Sgt. Maj. Joseph R. Allen, USA, Multi-National Corps—Iraq; Maj. Gen. Jeffery Hammond, USA, commander, Multi-National Division—Baghdad and 4th Infantry Division; Command Sgt. Maj. John S. Gioia, USA, Multi-National Division—Baghdad and 4th Infantry Division; Command Sgt. Maj. James W. Redmore, USA, Multi-National Division—Center; Maj. Gen. Michael Oates, USA, commander, Multi-National Division—Center; and Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki of Iraq.

Interview With Members of the White House Press Pool December 14, 2008

Audience Disruption at the Signing Ceremony With Prime Minister Nuri al- Maliki of Iraq

Q. Quick ducking there, sir.

The President. I was worried about you. I thought you were going to have a heart attack.

Q. I thought I was too. [*Laughter*] I'm with you on that.

The President. Okay, my opening statement: I didn't know what the guy said, but I saw his sole. [*Laughter*] You were more concerned than I was. I was watching your faces.

Q. I saw something black and round go by my face.

Q. Just to see that—

The President. —his first—other than shoes. [*Laughter*]

Q. —to duck. [*Laughter*]

The President. I'm pretty good at ducking, as most of you will know—

Q. You were quick.

Q. —ducking—

The President. I'm talking about ducking your questions. [*Laughter*]

Q. So you weren't a lame duck. [*Groans*]

The President. That bad? You know, I—look, I mean it was just a bizarre moment, but I've had other bizarre moments in the Presidency. I remember when Hu Jintao was here. Remember we had the big event? He's speaking, and all of a sudden I hear this noise, had no earthly idea what was

taking place, but it was the Falun Gong woman screaming at the top of her lungs. It was kind of an odd moment.

Questions? We're going to Afghanistan now, in case you hadn't been told. You probably thought we were going home, but no. Then we're going to go to—never mind. [Laughter]

Q. Well, not to belabor the point too much, on this man, but I have a serious question about it. Obviously, he's expressing a vein of anger that exists in Iraq, and—

The President. How do you know? I mean, how do we know what he's expressing? Who—

Q. We had a translator who said he shouted about the widows and orphans.

The President. I don't know. I've heard all kinds of stories. I heard he was representing a Baathist TV station. I don't know the facts, but let's find out the facts. All I'm telling you, it was a bizarre moment.

Q. I wanted to ask something broader.

The President. I don't think you can take one guy throwing shoes and say this represents a broad movement in Iraq. You can try to do that if you want to. I don't think it would be accurate.

Q. Well, then, separately from him—

The President. That's exactly what he wanted you to do. Like, I answered on your question, what he wanted you to do was to pay attention to him. And sure enough, you did. Now, look, I'm not suggesting you can't avoid it. But it—

U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Iraq/Progress in Iraq

Q. Well, how do you—how well do you think Iraq will transition from U.S. forces moving out of cities, pulling out, taking over—

The President. Well, obviously, I think it's going to be that the gains we have made are strong enough to accept the movement of troops into—out of cities into bases by June of this year. But more impor-

tantly, that's what General Odierno thinks is possible.

Q. —at this point about when you look at Iraq, and you still have over 140,000 troops. What are the challenges you see?

The President. I think the challenges—many of the challenges are political. In other words, the first big challenge is to have Provincial elections that enable people to vote and feel a part of the system, followed by national elections. That's a challenge. This is a challenge, however, that the Iraqis have met before. And obviously, you know, like the SOFA debate, it was a challenge to get SOFA through the—and SFA through the Council of Representatives because of the politics. But nevertheless, they came together.

Young democracies, when they debate big issues, sometimes can be strained. For example, there's a big debate going on between the central Government and the Provincial governments. But we went through the same debates ourselves. And as the society matures, they're going to be able to handle these debates in better fashion. So one of the important things was the success of the SFA/SOFA.

I remember the headlines: falling apart, may not make, confident it will happen, not confident it will happen. I mean, there was a lot of different opinions about whether or not this would eventually happen. And one reason why is because many of the people from the outside covering the debate on the inside were perplexed by the politics that was going on. But this is a democratic society. So I think the political process will be a challenge.

Progress in Iraq

Q. Sir, you got your first look at a part of Baghdad that wasn't the green zone and wasn't a military base. What did you think of it?

The President. You know, Mark [Mark Knoller, CBS Radio], look, I can't look at a stretch of road and draw a conclusion. I can only really react to what the people

who have been here for a period of time tell me. And I mean, the statistics tell you one thing. Obviously, when you look at the violence chart, it's down. But what's more important from my perspective is, can a government meet the needs of its people? Can they get beyond differences and come together and meet the needs of its people? As well as, are the Iraqi forces becoming more capable of providing more security? Is command and control structure better? Are the training missions better? Are they able to move from point A to point B in a way that is—enable them to have successful missions? When there's actionable intelligence, can they move?

And when you couple that with a political process that is relatively new compared to older democracies and the need to provide basic services for its people, one of the things that struck me was not the road, but was the amount of electricity there was inside Baghdad. It looked like a pretty well-lit city.

The other thing that struck me was, there was a lot of activity on the ground. Now, you got to remember, my frame of reference is different from you all, you who have been there. I saw a lot of kids playing soccer; I saw a lot of activity, a lot of street activity on the route we took. And General Odierno said a while ago that wouldn't have been the case.

U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Iraq

Q. You've always urged patience in withdrawing troops, coming out; you move slowly on that based on conditions on the ground. Now you're talking about within 6 months, that we'll be drawing combat brigades from the city.

The President. Cities, right.

Q. Do you think that the Iraqis are ready to step up to that now? Do you think that there are flaws or there—not flaws, but potential conflicts—

The President. First of all, I strongly objected to a politics timetable. The debate over the timetable of withdrawal was a—

was one that was unilateral in nature proposed by people who didn't think we ought to be in Iraq in the first place.

Secondly, I agreed to the terms of the SOFA because General Petraeus and General Odierno said that these terms are reasonable terms, and that is, we'll be moving troops out of cities into bases, close by to help if need be. Just because a troop is on a base doesn't mean that that troop won't be available to help the Iraqi forces. So they've come to the considered judgment that in the cities, the Iraqis are capable of providing security.

There is a plan in place that has been executed—successfully executed—that now the Iraqis can assume and continue to fulfill. That's a lot different than it was 18 months ago, when the plan was on paper and hadn't been executed yet. And so there's been a model for success.

Presidential Transition/Iraq Policy/Strategic Framework Agreement (SFA)/Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA)

Q. Is that what you meant by a bipartisan foundation now looking ahead to the next Presidency?

The President. I meant by a bipartisan foundation that the debates on whether or not it was the right thing or not are past, the need to make sure that we continue the successes can be a bipartisan—can be bipartisan and should be bipartisan.

President-elect Obama has now got a seasoned general in Baghdad with a SFA/SOFA agreed to by the United States and Iraq, and by the way, has been kept abreast upon election about what the SOFA—or the SFA/SOFA means.

And one of the challenges for the Iraqis is going to be—for the U.S. is to get up to our committees and get working on the SFA, which we're going to do. Part of my mission here was to remind the Iraqi Government that there is still a lot of work to be done on SFA/SOFA; our embassy agrees with that as well. And that—but I also told them that I—that our transition

is going to be a seamless transition, and that—I'm never going to put words into President-elect Obama's mouth, but by the decisions he made with Secretary Gates, for example, I believe he understands the strategic importance of Iraq. And now he's got a framework from which to make decisions.

National Economy/U.S. Auto Industry

Q. Mr. President, Iraq is obviously a big concern for Americans, but the economy seems to be even more of a concern. The automakers are in dire straits. How soon do you think your administration will be coming out with its plan for emergency aid? And are you leaning towards dipping into TARP to help—

The President. No question that the economy is number one on people's mind, and it should be. We're in a recession. These are serious economic times. People are concerned about their jobs; people are concerned about their value of their 401(k)s. This is a very difficult period.

We took note that there was a majority in the House and the Senate that voted for a package for the autos that would have caused them to begin to show how they're going to be viable. In other words, I have made this statement that given the status of the financial system, an abrupt bankruptcy for the autos could be devastating for the economy. And therefore, we've tried to work with Congress to accomplish the objective of not cratering the economy as well as making sure good money doesn't go after bad.

So we're now in the process of working through with the stakeholders a way forward, and we're not quite ready to announce that yet.

Q. Do you have any timetable, though, that you're looking at?

The President. Obviously, we're—this will not be a long process because of the economic—the fragility of the autos.

Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP)

Q. And, sir, are you leaning towards using the TARP money?

The President. I signaled that that's a possibility.

White House Press Secretary Dana Perino. You guys have 8 minutes left. You're going to Afghanistan. You might want to ask—

Q. —talk about it.

The President. Is that where we're going?

Military Operations in Afghanistan

Q. I think so. That's what you said. And I trust you with that. Can you tell me what—define the mission of the troops going in there in January and those who Secretary Gates wants in by the summer, the additional—

The President. The mission we had before, which is help this young democracy develop the institutions so it can survive on its own, to not repeat the mistakes of the 1980s, which is achieve an objective and leave, and deny a safe haven for Al Qaida.

Martha [Martha Raddatz, ABC News] asked me the question about the conditions in Afghanistan. No question, the violence is up. But one reason why the violence is up is that we're now putting troops into places where there hadn't been troops, begin to press these guys in places where they hadn't been pressed.

Just like the surge. You might remember, violence went up when we went into Iraq with more troops. And so the objective is to provide enough security so that a political system can develop that will be a—provide a stable platform for economic viability, and get a good education and good health.

Now the degree of difficulty in Afghanistan is high. This is a significantly larger country than Iraq and significantly poorer. The infrastructure is difficult. But nevertheless, the mission is essential, and that is,

we cannot achieve our objective of removing Al Qaida safe havens by kicking out Taliban and saying, “Okay, now let’s leave.”

And so I recognize we needed more troops. You know, President-elect Obama is going to be making decisions on troops, and we’ve been calling upon our NATO allies to put in more troops. One of the things that when—was barely noticed was the quiet surge in Afghanistan. We had kind of level platform of troops; then we moved in quite a few number, and so did our NATO allies. And now there’s going to be—ramp up some more.

Pakistan/Military Operations in Afghanistan

Q. In Pakistan, I know that there are plans being worked up that combine—that you have to look at Pakistan and Afghanistan as the problem. Can you talk a little bit about that?

The President. Obviously, if Pakistan is a place from which people feel comfortable attacking infrastructure, citizens, troops, then it’s still going—it’s going to make it difficult to succeed in Afghanistan. That’s why we’re working with the Pakistan Government to keep the pressure on the extremists. And the more that we can get Pakistan and Afghanistan to cooperate, the easier it will be to enforce that part of the border region.

Q. What’s your assessment of how Pakistan is doing on that front? Are they—

The President. Well, first of all, the first question is, is there a determination—

[*At this point, there was a slight disturbance aboard Air Force One.*]

The President. —the other shoe just dropped. [*Laughter*] Look, I’m going to be thinking of shoe jokes for a long time. [*Laughter*]

Q. [*Inaudible*]

The President. Are you?

Q. Yes.

The President. I haven’t heard any good ones yet.

President Zardari is determined; he’s said so publicly, and he’s said so to me privately. He looked at me in the eye and said, “You don’t need to talk to me about extremist violence; after all, my wife got killed by extremists.” Like a lot of other situations in which you’re trying to deal with extremists who get embedded in the population, there are two aspects. One is to pressure them and to bring them to justice and, simultaneously, try to win the hearts and minds of the local folks, which is what is happening Iraq.

See, in Iraq, just remember, we did a clear, semi-build, and no hold. And it’s the same concept in Afghanistan: clear, build, and hold. And it required 30,000 more troops to get that done, plus the training mission in Iraq to get enough troops to hold. Obviously, our commanders believe that the hold part is good enough for us to be able to move our troops. You understand the reason I moved troops out of cities into bases is to enhance the credibility of the Government.

Well, in Afghanistan, the same principle applies. We have cleared, and we have built some, but in certain Provinces we have not held. So now more troops will go in, and as they start to move, you’ll see violence tick up because they’re clearing new areas. PRTs, which were very successful in Iraq, are now being increased in Afghanistan. That’s part of the build part. And training up Afghanis to be a part of the hold is going to take a while. But nevertheless, there’s optimism there because the Afghan fighters are good fighters; they’re proud to be in the military, and we’re headed toward 135,000.

Pakistan/War on Terror

Q. You said there were two elements to Pakistan’s work though. You said one was whether Zardari was determined; you said he was. What was the—

The President. That’s the press—find them and get them, press them hard, and

then win the hearts and minds of the locals through economic development.

Use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in Afghanistan-Pakistan Border Regions

Q. Sir, was that made more difficult by the use of UAVs? Are you and Hamid Karzai on the same page on that?

The President. Well, as you know—you know very well that when it comes to certain matters, the U.S. Government doesn't discuss operations.

Support for President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan/Free Elections

Q. Sir, Afghanistan is made up of a lot of different ethnic groups.

The President. Yes.

Q. A lot of them do not support Hamid Karzai. Is he the right person to lead the country through the next—

The President. Well, that will be determined by the Afghanistan people. That's the great thing about elections. He got 55 percent. You know, some of us would have loved to have 55 percent. [Laughter] And 51.5, not bad.

So the way you resolve a question like that is to have open and transparent elections. I believe strongly in the election process because it is the best way to determine for certain what people think. You know, a controversial decision of mine was to press forward with the elections in the Palestinian territories. I was told, "Well, the wrong side may win." My attitude is, the best way to determine what the people think is to let them vote.

And Hamas didn't win because they said we promise you violence; Hamas said we'd win because we promise you better services. So my answer to the losers of the election is, if they have credibility at providing better services, why don't you figure out how you can do a better job and respond to the people? That's what elections do.

So the election process in Afghanistan will once again provide people an oppor-

tunity to say, "We're tired of this, or we appreciate that." And it's the good public servant who listens to what the people say.

Middle East

Q. Mr. President, if there was one—I'm sorry, go ahead.

Q. You mentioned the Middle East. Is there any more to do in your remaining 37 days on that?

The President. Ed [Edwin Chen, Bloomberg News], we've—Condi is working a U.N. Security Council that affirms the Annapolis process. The question would be, will President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert want to lay out a specific state? And that's to be determined. But there is a way forward now.

The big sea change in the Middle East on this issue is that by far the majority of people recognize that the only way to peace is two states. And in 2001, that was not the case. In 2001, most of the Israeli political class believed that "greater Israel" was the only way to have security. And the Palestinian Authority was run by a person who could not deliver peace and was not trustworthy. So now you've got a Palestinian President who recognizes Israel's right to exist, and a Israeli political class that says, "If we want security, if we want peace, we've got to work for a Palestinian state." So the framework is there.

And the other point—the other significant change was that Annapolis brought many in the Arab world to the table. And in order for there to ever be a Palestinian state, any Palestinian leader is going to have to have strong backing from the neighboring states, which was one of the reasons why Camp David fell apart under my predecessor. In other words, the other reason why is because the interlocutor on the Palestinian side just was—failed the Palestinian people. Not President—this was not President Clinton's fault.

White House Press Secretary Perino. Going to take one more.

End of Presidential Term/North Korea

Q. Just—in fact, it's sort of a wrap-up question—

The President. I'm going to go take a nap. Anybody—[laughter].

Q. If there is one thing you wish—

The President. Steven Lee [Steven Lee Myers, *The New York Times*], you want to take a nap?

Q. No, I'm all right.

Q. He doesn't need sleep.

The President. You look a little—[laughter]. Mind if I call you Jimmy Lee?

Q. Steven Lee.

The President. Stevie Lee, I mean.

Q. Stevie. [Laughter]

Q. If there is anything, when you look at this last month or so you have left, that you wish you could accomplish, in the foreign policy arena, or anything you want to say? If you had a single thing that you want to accomplish, what would it be?

The President. Last month? Well, it's to solidify the frameworks that will enable problems to be solved.

Take, for example, the North Korean issue. It is much easier to solve a problem diplomatically when there is more than one voice speaking to the leader of North Korea. And a success of this administration is to put a framework in place that has China, the United States, and South Korea and Russia and Japan all at the table, all saying the same thing. In this case, the message is, we need to have a verifiable process in place to determine whether or not you're fulfilling your obligations.

Secondly, in the old process it used to be, we will give you what you ask for and hope that you respond. Now it is, here's what you must do if you want our help. We've reversed the process. And it's not just the United States speaking. So right now what you're watching is that the leader of North Korea is trying to test the process. First he said something Japan, and now he's saying something about so-and-so. And so the objective is to keep our partners

firm on the understanding that the six-party process is the best way to solve the North Korean issue.

So he'll test—and this isn't the first time he's tested. He signed an agreement in September of 2005. Everybody said, "Great, looks like we're on our way to having the problem solved." And then he tested and changed his mind and did this, that, and the other. And the key is to be firm and patient with a structure that will enable the next President or the next President after that to be able to solve the problem diplomatically.

So there's one area right there that we're working on. Obviously, the Security Council resolution on dealing with the Annapolis process. We got the SOFA—SFA/SOFA done on Iraq.

Q. You got India done.

The President. Well, India was done, but she said the last month.

End of Presidential Term/Afghanistan

Q. Anything on Iraq, sir, in the last month?

Q. Afghanistan?

The President. Well, I think I should travel to Afghanistan in the last month of my Presidency, although it's not exactly the last month. So what's the date?

White House Press Secretary Perino. The 14th.

The President. Fourteen. Seventeen plus 17, 37 days.

Q. Why is it you want to be in Afghanistan?

The President. I want to be in Afghanistan to say thank you to President Karzai, to let the people of Afghanistan know that the United States has stood with them and will stand with them. See, it's—if you notice, Steven Lee asked a good question—bipartisan foundation. These nations need to know that the United States has been with them, is with them, and will be with them. So the trip is a way to, say thanks to leaders that I have been working with for a long period of time.

By the way, both leaders in my last conversations, or the last couple of them, have been saying, “You must come and visit us before you leave.” And of course, I never committed until however long it was ago, 48 hours ago.

So okay, I’m going to go take a nap.

NOTE: The interview began at 11:39 p.m. aboard Air Force One en route to Afghanistan. In his remarks, the President referred to President Hu Jintao of China; Lt. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Corps—Iraq; Gen.

David H. Petraeus, USA, commander, U.S. Central Command; President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan; former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, who was killed in a suicide attack in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, on December 27, 2007; Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice; President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority; Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel; and Chairman Kim Jong Il of North Korea. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 15. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Remarks to Military Personnel at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan December 15, 2008

The President. Thank you all very much. Thanks for the warm welcome. Thanks for coming out to greet me at a kind of a strange hour. [Laughter] General, I appreciate your accommodating what I’m calling Rudolph One. [Laughter] After all, it is the holiday season. You might have heard, we made a little refueling stop in Baghdad earlier today. And now I’m proud to be back in Afghanistan. You might call it as—a early-morning wake-up call. Or in some of your cases, I might have shut—cut your evening off. We won’t go there. [Laughter] In either case, I am proud to be with brave souls serving the United States of America.

And my dear wife sends her very best regards. So on behalf of Laura and everybody else back home, Merry Christmas and a happy holidays. Congratulations on your tremendous accomplishments. And above all, thank you for volunteering to defend the United States of America.

You know, they often say, “What are you going to miss?” I’ll miss the airplane, of course. [Laughter] But I’m mainly going to miss being the Commander in Chief of such an outstanding group of men and women.

I appreciate Sergeant Major Vince Camacho for his service. I want to thank Ambassador Bill Wood; the commanding general of U.S. Forces, Afghanistan, General David McKiernan; Brigadier General Mike Holmes, commanding general, 45th [455th]* Expeditionary Wing; soldiers of the 101st Airborne, the Screaming Eagles.

I told the General that I had the honor of going to Fort Campbell the other day. And I saw a lot of your comrades, and I saw a lot of your families. And they have a message for you: Air Assault!

I thank the airmen of the 455th Air Expeditionary Wing. I kind of like your motto: “Start right, finish strong.”

Audience members. Hooah!

The President. Yes, that sounds pretty good for a guy with 36 days left. [Laughter]

The soldiers of the 3d Brigade Combat Team; 1st Infantry Division, the Big Red One; soldiers of the 1st Maneuver Enhancement Brigade, Task Force Warrior; I want to thank all the troops from our coalition partners.

* White House correction.