

**Remarks at a Welcoming Ceremony
for Humanitarian Aid Workers
Rescued From Afghanistan and an
Exchange With Reporters**

November 26, 2001

The President. Good morning. I'm so honored to welcome two courageous souls to the Rose Garden to celebrate a story of joy and a story of hope, a story of two women who were rescued, a story about the faith that sustained them and a family that clearly loves them.

Heather Mercer and Dayna Curry decided to go to help people who needed help. Their faith led them to Afghanistan. One woman who knows them best put it this way: They had a calling to serve the poorest of the poor, and Afghanistan is where that calling took them.

And Heather and Dayna's faith in God sustained them throughout their ordeal. It's a wonderful story about prayer, about a faith that can sustain people in good times and in bad times. Their faith was a source of hope that kept them from becoming discouraged.

I talked to them right after their release, their freedom, and I sensed no bitterness in their voice, no fatigue, just joy. It was an uplifting experience for me to talk to these courageous souls.

Theirs is also a story about people who—in our country—who rallied for them. People prayed all around the country. I was particularly struck by the fact that Heather's dad offered to take her place in prison. I was struck by the fact that a country preacher out of central Texas flew to Afghanistan to lend his presence in any way that would help. I know there are a lot of people right outside of Crawford that were praying for these girls' release. And when they were, people all across Baylor University cheered. Something besides football became more important in their lives: life, itself.

This is a story of a military that is committed to achieving certain objectives. In my speech in front of the United States Congress, I said to the Taliban that one of the objectives was to release the humanitarian aid workers that were being detained against their will. We've achieved that objective. And I want to thank our military for rescuing

these girls. And I want to thank those on the ground in Afghanistan who helped with their rescue, as well.

So it's a joyous day to welcome two good souls to the Rose Garden. I'll ask them to say a few comments, and then I'll be glad to answer some questions, if you have any.

[At this point, Heather Mercer and Dayna Curry made brief remarks.]

The President. Good job.

Operation Enduring Freedom

Q. Mr. President, following up on the talk of the military's role in rescuing these two ladies, can you tell us why you have deployed 1,000 marines, at least 1,000 marines this weekend on the ground, what their mission is? How many more are coming? And how much more risky has their mission become with this advancement of the troops?

The President. Well, first, I'll let the Defense Department explain the mission. Well, first of all, we know the mission. The mission is to bring Al Qaida to justice and to make sure Afghanistan no longer serves as a haven for terrorists. And we've got a military strategy that we're implementing. I'll let the Secretary of Defense, in his daily briefing, go into the operational details as he sees fit.

But this is a dangerous period of time. This is a period of time in which we're now hunting down the people who are responsible for bombing America. I said a long time ago, one of our objectives is to smoke them out and get them running and to bring them to justice. We're smoking them out; they're running; and now we're going to bring them to justice. I also said we'll use whatever means is necessary to achieve that objective. And that's exactly what we're going to do.

The American people must understand that we've got a long way to go in order to achieve our objective in this theater. But we're patient; we're resolved; and we will stay the course until we achieve our objective.

National Economy

Q. Mr. President, what's your reaction, sir, to news that the U.S. economy has been in a recession since March?

The President. My reaction that—since March? Well, I knew that the economy was

not in good shape right after I took office; that's why I urged that we pass a tax relief plan. I remember the debate clearly, about people saying, well, the economy is strong. But it wasn't. It was flagging; it was weakening.

And that tax relief plan is going to be part of an economic recovery package that will make sense for the long term of the country. We've got low interest rates. We've got reasonable energy prices. We've got good tax policy in place. We've got the framework for economic recovery. I hope Congress moves quickly on an economic stimulus package. The Senate needs to get a bill and get it into conference, so we can resolve differences and I can sign it before Christmas. But I am, obviously, aware that our economy is slow. And we will do everything we can to enhance recovery.

Operation Enduring Freedom

Q. Mr. President, getting back to the earlier question, aside from September 11th, which cannot be forgotten, the war on terrorism has been truly relatively American-casualty free. And in recent years, Americans have been generally casualty-averse in its military operations.

Are you concerned that Americans may suddenly start getting back into that pattern where they're less accepting of American casualties?

The President. Well, first of all, obviously, no President or Commander in Chief hopes anybody loses life in the theater. But it's going to happen. I said this early on, as the campaign began: America must be prepared for loss of life. I believe the American people understand that we've got a mighty struggle on our hands and that there will be sacrifice. After all, some people made the greatest sacrifice possible on September the 11th, and that is those who took the airplane down. They said the Lord's Prayer on the phone to their loved ones; the loved ones heard, "Let's roll"; and they took a plane down so that it might not kill others, such as people working in the White House or at the Capitol.

No, I think the American people understand we're in for a long, long struggle in order to rid the world of terrorism and that

there might be loss of life. I pray that not be the case. But our brave men and women who signed up for the military understand the risk inherent with being in the military.

Major [Major Garrett, Cable News Network].

Q. Mr. President, at Fort Campbell, you said, "Across the world and across the years, we will fight the evil ones, and we will win"——

The President. Yes.

Future Counterterrorism Efforts

Q. ——suggesting very strongly that Afghanistan is only the first step. What would you say about Iraq, as you begin to look at the next steps in the campaign against global terrorism? What message would you like to send to them now?

The President. Well, my message is, is that if you harbor a terrorist, you're a terrorist. If you feed a terrorist, you're a terrorist. If you develop weapons of mass destruction that you want to terrorize the world, you'll be held accountable. And I also have said, as I recall, at the White House, we're going to make sure that we accomplish each mission that we tackle. First things first.

Now having said that, we—the coalition has arrested over 300 people. I can't wait to thank my friend President Aznar of Spain for having arrested eight terrorists in Spain. In other words, there is an international drag—international effort to bring people to justice. And over 300 people that have been involved with Al Qaida have been brought to justice. Terrorism is terrorism. In this country, we'll deal with it.

Bill [Bill Plante, CBS News].

Q. Sir, you mentioned President Aznar of Spain. Spain says that they don't want to extradite those people unless they can be tried under our standard court system and not by a military tribunal. Are you concerned with the amount of dissent over your decision to establish military tribunals?

The President. Not the least bit concerned. I made the right decision. A President must have the option of using a military tribunal in times of war. I look forward to explaining to my friend the President of Spain why I made that decision. It makes eminent sense to have the military tribunal

option available. It makes sense for national security purposes. It makes sense for the protection of potential jurors. It makes sense for homeland security. It is the right decision to make, and I will explain that to any leader who asks.

Terry [Terry Moran, ABC News].

Human Cloning

Q. Mr. President, it seems an important line has been crossed with the attempt to clone a human being by a private laboratory. What's your reaction to that? Do you think there's any way to put this genie back in the bottle?

The President. My reaction, Terry, is that the use of embryos to clone is wrong. We should not, as a society, grow life to destroy it. And that's exactly what's taking place. And I have made that position very clear. I haven't changed my mind. And this evidence today that they're trying to achieve that objective, to grow an embryo in order to extract a stem cell, in order for that embryo to die, is bad public policy. Not only that, it's morally wrong, in my opinion.

Yes.

The Vice President

Q. Mr. President, does the current threat justify the Vice President remaining in an undisclosed location? And even though he's not——

The President. I just ate breakfast with him. It's no longer undisclosed. [Laughter] And he looks great. I think my adjective was "swell." He still looks swell.

Q. How long is this separation going to go on? Do you think that——

The President. I had breakfast with him. I mean, I shouldn't say that. Right after I had breakfast, I met with him. I spent the morning with him. As a matter of fact, he was here to welcome these families into the White House.

Q. But do you still consider him, even though he's not as visible and doesn't, in terms of visibility, appear to be playing the same kind of role we saw before September 11th——

The President. No, the Vice President is very much engaged in the administration, and I value his advice. I trust his judgment.

I talk to him every single day. And today I was visiting with him face to face. As I say, he looks swell.

Stretch. [Richard Keil, Bloomberg News].

Iraq

Q. To follow up on Major's question.

The President. What was his question?

Q. Whether Iraq could be the next target of the antiterror campaign.

The President. Oh, okay.

Q. Does Saddam Hussein have to agree to allow weapons inspectors back into Iraq? Is that an unconditional demand of yours?

The President. Saddam Hussein agreed to allow inspectors in his country. And in order to prove to the world he's not developing weapons of mass destruction, he ought to let the inspectors back in.

Yes.

Q. And if he does not do that, sir, what will be the consequence? If he does not do that, what will be the consequences?

The President. That's up for—he'll find out.

Q. Sir, what is your thinking right now about taking the war to Iraq? You suggested that on Wednesday, when you said Afghanistan was just the beginning.

The President. I stand by those words. Afghanistan is still just the beginning. If anybody harbors a terrorist, they're a terrorist. If they fund a terrorist, they're a terrorist. If they house terrorists, they're terrorists. I mean, I can't make it any more clearly to other nations around the world. If they develop weapons of mass destruction that will be used to terrorize nations, they will be held accountable. And as for Mr. Saddam Hussein, he needs to let inspectors back in his country to show us that he is not developing weapons of mass destruction.

Yes, David [David Gregory, NBC News].

Weapons of Mass Destruction

Q. Mr. President, following up on that thought, when you initially made—defined terrorism in your speech before Congress, you did not include the weapons of mass destruction. Are you now extending this to countries like North Korea, other places where we have had evidence over the years

that there's been development of such weapons?

The President. Well, clearly, in terms of North Korea, we want North Korea to allow inspectors in, to determine whether or not they are. We've had that discussion with North Korea. I made it very clear to North Korea that in order for us to have relations with them, that we want to know, are they developing weapons of mass destruction? And they ought to stop proliferating.

So part of the war on terror is to deny terrorist weapons getting—I mean, weapons to be used for means of terror getting in the hands of nations that will use them. And so I'm not quite sure of the——

Q. I'm just asking if you've expanded your definition to countries who don't just harbor terrorists but also develop such weapons.

The President. Have I expanded the definition? I've always had that definition, as far as I'm concerned.

Yes, ma'am.

Pakistan

Q. Mr. President, you've said a number of times you will go to all lengths to get members of Al Qaida. There's now news that Pakistan has airlifted some of its citizens back to Pakistan. Are you concerned that they may be taking members of Al Qaida and will not turn them over?

The President. No, I'm not. We've had good discussions with Pakistan. They understand the objective is to bring Al Qaida to justice, and they've indicated they'll help us do so.

All right, thank you all very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:35 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Ms. Mercer's father, John Mercer; Danny Mulkey, assistant pastor, Antioch Community Church, Waco, TX; President Jose Maria Aznar of Spain; and President Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

Statement on Signing the Departments of Veterans Affairs and Housing and Urban Development, and Independent Agencies Appropriations Act, 2002

November 26, 2001

Today I have signed into law H.R. 2620, the "Departments of Veterans Affairs and Housing and Urban Development, and Independent Agencies Appropriations Act, 2002."

I appreciate the bipartisan effort that has gone into producing this Act. The Act abides by the agreed upon aggregate funding level for Fiscal Year 2002 of \$686 billion and supports several of my Administration's key initiatives with:

- \$955 million for the Veterans Affairs Duty to Assist initiative to improve performance in claims processing and assist veterans with their claims;
- \$160 million for the National Science Foundation Math and Science Partnerships initiative, which provides funds for States to join with institutions of higher education in strengthening math and science education in grades K–12; and
- \$50 million for the Housing and Urban Development Down Payment Assistance initiative that assists low-income families with the down payment on their first home.

Several additional initiatives I have proposed were worthy of funding but are not part of this bill: the Community Technology Centers and Improving Access programs in HUD, the Silver Scholarships and Veterans Mission for Youth programs under the Corporation for National and Community Service, and the VA/DOD Medical Care Choice initiative.

The Silver Scholarship Program would have provided Silver Scholarships to 10,000 older Americans who volunteer 500 hours of service tutoring and mentoring students in after-school programs. Each \$1,000 scholarship could be deposited in an education savings account for use by seniors' children,