

These are historic times. This is an historic moment. The world watches for any weakness. They will see no weakness in America. They will see no weakness in Italy. We will answer every challenge. U.S. soldiers and Iraqi security forces are systematically destroying the illegal militia in the south of Iraq. Coalition forces are working with Iraqis in Fallujah to end control by Saddam loyalists and foreign fighters. We're building up Iraqi security forces so at some point, they can safeguard their own security. We're flexible in our methods, but our goal is unchanging. Iraq will be free. Iraq will be a democratic nation.

The sons and daughters of Italy who are serving and sacrificing with us in this cause have earned the gratitude of the American people. We're honored to call the Italian Republic one of our closest friends and strongest allies in the world. We are proud of the great Italian heritage in America. I thank each of you for carrying this heritage forward.

I thank you for your warm welcome tonight. And I ask for God's blessing on the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:50 p.m. at the Grand Hyatt Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Charles Gargano, honorary gala chairman; Philip R. Piccigallo, executive director and chief executive officer, Joseph Sciamé, chairman, and Paul S. Polo, president, Sons of Italy Foundation; Rudolph W. Giuliani, former mayor of New York City; Iraqi Governing Council President Izz al-Din al-Salim, who was killed in a suicide car bomb attack on May 17 in Baghdad; and former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq.

Interview With Al Zaman

May 18, 2004

Q. Mr. President, I'd like to thank you very much for this opportunity that you provided to Al Zaman newspaper and the Iraqi media. I hope that this meeting and interview with you will be meaningful and will give the Iraqi people the answers they're looking for.

The President. Yes, I look forward to answering your questions. I want to thank you for coming. Welcome to the White House, and welcome to America.

Assassination of Izz al-Din al-Salim/Iraqi Freedom

Q. Mr. President, a few days ago there was an assassination attempt of—an actual assassination of Mr. Izz al-Din al-Salim, and you have described this as a terrorist act. Are there particular groups behind this assassination? And what are they, specifically? Who is behind this assassination attempt?

The President. Well, I don't know. I can't name a person yet. We're looking to find out who did this terrible, terrible deed. The facts will come out. We'll find the truth.

But one of the truths we do know is that there are some people who are trying to stop Iraq from being a free country. They hate the thought of Iraq being free, and so therefore, they're trying to kill people, innocent lives, to shake our will and to frighten Iraqi people. America will not be frightened, and I hope that those who love freedom in Iraq will not be frightened. We must continue to work together to achieve the objective, which is an Iraq which is free, whole, and at peace, so people can realize their potential.

We'll find the truth about who killed this good man, and he will be brought to justice by the Iraqi citizens.

Transition to Iraqi Interim Government

Q. Mr. President, what are your future plans regarding Iraq and the Iraqi people in developing both their political life and their civic life?

The President. Sure. June 30th is an important day in modern Iraqi history, because it's the day that sovereignty will be passed to an interim government. And when America says something, we mean it. So on that day there will be a new government, which will begin—which will replace Mr. Bremer and the Governing Council. At the same time, America will set up an Embassy, headed by a very distinguished diplomat named Ambassador Negroponte. He will have the responsibility for seeing to it that the reconstruction aid approved by the American people through the Congress is spent properly. So in other words, we'll continue with the reconstruction aid.

We will work with the new interim government on security matters. It's going to be

very important for the people of Iraq to realize that sovereignty has been passed and that America wants to help the new government prepare the way for elections, help the new government prepare the way for peace, to help the new government on security matters by doing two things: one, training Iraq, continuing to train policemen and Iraqi forces so the Iraqi people take care of their own security needs against the few who want to stop the hopes of many; as well as help the Iraqi forces deal with foreign fighters, for example, who are still in the country and trying to kill people and intimidate and to create fear.

So we'll have an active role. But the truth of the matter is, Iraq will be run by Iraqi citizens. The future of Iraq is in your hands. We're there to help. We're there to help the people realize dreams. The people of this country are very generous and compassionate people, and we want you to succeed.

Transfer of Sovereignty

Q. Mr. President, you mentioned now about the transfer of sovereignty through a political process. But there are those who are saying that the transfer of sovereignty on June 30th will be an incomplete sovereignty and not a complete sovereignty. So, Mr. President, do you have different issues of this—

The President. I do have a different view. It will be a complete passage of sovereignty. And then we'll work with the government to help the government achieve objectives. And we'll work with the United Nations. But what happens on June 30th is that the ministries will be run by Iraqis. Some ministries, as you know, aren't. I mean, the coalition—the CPA is making many decisions for the Iraqi people. Now it's time for the Iraqi people.

Now, people will say, "Well, can you give us help? We need help in certain areas." And of course the coalition and America will want to help, but the decisionmaking process will be Iraqi leadership. This will be a big day. It's an important day. And then, of course, there will elections to a general assembly that will then write a new constitution. And there will be another election. And America wants to help. And I think the interim government is going to realize it's important for our

troops to stay there to make sure that there is security, and we will do so. We will help. But this is an important day. It's a transfer of sovereignty, and people will see that it's a transfer of sovereignty.

Prisoner Abuse in Abu Ghraib Prison

Q. Mr. President, I thank you for this explanation and your insistence on transferring sovereignty on the 30th of June. I would like to move into another issue, which is much more sensitive in Iraq. There is the scandal of the behavior of American soldiers in abusing prisoners in Abu Ghraib Prison. Some of those prison guards said that they carried out these acts as instructions coming from higher up. Do you believe, Mr. President, that there are much more senior people in the administration who could be behind this?

The President. Let me first speak directly to the Iraqi people through you on this matter. The actions in that prison did not reflect the attitude of America and the American people. These humiliating acts do not reflect our character.

Secondly, the Iraqi people and the world will see that we will conduct a thorough investigation for the whole world to see so that the truth will be known as to how these actions might have taken place. In other words, were there orders; who gave the orders? And the world will see that—which is very different, by the way, from a process that would have been under Saddam Hussein. In other words, you would never know these abuses took place, much less being able to ask the leader questions as a member of the free press or the ability for the world to see a very transparent process.

I want to know the truth too, and I look forward to a thorough investigation. And there will be a thorough investigation. As a matter of fact, part of the investigation process is to bring people to justice. And there will be a trial shortly in Iraq, and we will find out the—in other words, this will be the beginnings of the process where people will see justice will be meted out for the action of those guards. But you've just got to know that I'm interested in the truth as well, just like you're interested in the truth.

And one of the things in our country is people are innocent until proven guilty. And

therefore, with that presumption of innocence, therefore, the process must be very thorough before you start accusing people. And that's what you'll see. You'll see this unfold in a series of hearings and investigations and, in some cases, military trials.

Muqtada Al Sadr

Q. Mr. President, now there are very sad events in the city of Najaf. There is fighting between the Al Sadr's militia and the coalition forces. How do you look and see Mr. Al Sadr, and why do you think that the CPA refused an agreement with Muqtada Al Sadr as some reports mentioned that the Shi'a religious leaders, such as Sistani, embraced such an agreement, but it was rejected by the CPA? Don't you think this is an escalation? And who would be benefited from that escalation?

The President. I've got to tell you—I must tell you, I am not exactly sure of the agreement to which you refer. I do know a couple of things: One, that Shi'a leaders are getting very impatient with Al Sadr and that it's best that the Iraqi leadership take care of him. One of the things we've insisted—or I've said publicly is that he's been accused of a crime, and he ought to be tried by Iraqis. And they ought to settle this issue in a court in Iraq.

Secondly, I've made it very clear that our troops will honor the great religious shrines in the holy sites and that we'll protect the holy sites. Now, on the other hand, he's made the decision to occupy the holy sites, and that's unfortunate.

Thirdly, I will tell you that when militia threaten our troops or threaten innocent Iraqis, we will protect ourselves and protect them, because a peaceful Iraq must not have militias running—you know, making decisions. There needs to order, and there needs to be calm.

But Mr. Sadr, who has made some pretty outlandish statements in the past, can best be dealt with by Shi'a leadership. And obviously, would hope this will end his occupation, will end soon.

Now, as to negotiations, I'm not at liberty to comment on it because I'm not exactly sure about what you're referring to.

Q. There were some negotiations, and there was an agreement between Muqtada Al Sadr, according to what the press reports said——

The President. Why don't you check on that. Thank you.

Iraqi Reconstruction

Q. Mr. President, I believe that you might agree with me that there is a slowdown in the reconstruction process of Iraq, and some of the donors country are not fulfilling their financial obligations. What is the U.S. intention in motivating those countries to fulfill their obligations?

The President. Well, that's a very good question. I think, first of all, the first question is, if I were you I'd ask, "Will America fulfill its obligation?" And the answer is, yes, we will, which is a lot of reconstruction money.

Now, the expenditure of that money has slowed down from our perspective because of the security situation. And that's why it's essential that Iraqis, themselves, stand up and join those who are anxious for life to improve, to reject the violence of the few people. It's essential that we be successful at transforming the police force into—and the forces that are there to protect infrastructure into a viable force which works, with a good command structure, an Iraqi command structure, so that projects can forward.

Secondly, I have a chance to speak to leaders of the world in person here in the next couple weeks, and we'll continue to remind them of the joint obligation the free world has to see to it that we're successful in Iraq. And the definition of success is a society which is peaceful and free, that governs itself, a society in which children can go to school and which the health care is good and which the infrastructure is strong, and in which the businesses flourish—all of which I think is going to happen, by the way—that we all have an obligation to work toward that day, because a free and peaceful Iraq is in the world's interest.

And so I'll continue to remind people of their obligations. I will tell you, though, part of the reluctance for people to come forward is because of the security situation. People see on their TV screens the fact that aid workers or reconstruction workers get killed,

and it creates a sense of fear—precisely what the enemy wants. That’s why it’s important for the Iraq populace and the leadership here in America to stand firm in the face of these terrorist attacks and not be intimidated * and to move forward with a positive program that is going to make—it’s going to change the country in such a positive way.

Syria/Iran/Iraqi Freedom

Q. Mr. President, last question, and it’s a two-part question. How do you view the countries neighboring Iraq? And Syria was punished. Is it because their position regarding the American presence in Iraq? And what is the situation regarding Iran? And do you—afraid of Shiite state and government in Iraq? And what is the message you’d like to convey to the Iraqi people? Thank you.

The President. That is an excellent question. First, no, my decision towards Syria was really based upon a series of requests we had of the Government to reject terrorist organizations, to help fight off cross-border infiltration into your country, to join us to make the area peaceful. And our requests were rejected, and therefore, I started a process as a result of a law passed by the United States Congress.

Secondly, in terms of Iran, my concern with Iran is that they would—that they believe they can develop a nuclear weapon. I think that would be a big mistake, and I think it’s very important for the world to work with the Iranians and insist they not develop a weapon.

No, I do not believe that there’s going to be a Shi’a theocracy in Iraq dominated by Iran. I believe the Iraqi people are—want to have their own country, their own identity, that understand the Shi’a, Sunni, and Kurd can and must work together for the good of the whole. And I believe the Iraqi people don’t want to be dominated by anybody. They want the United States to be a friend, but the United States to not dominate. They certainly don’t want the Iranians to dominate. Iraq is plenty capable of being a strong, independent nation, and our objective is to help them become that nation.

* White House correction.

I want the Iraqi people to hear me on this. I’m told that some in Iraq are very worried that America will lose its will and not help this important country full of good people become a free country. The Iraqi people must understand that I will not lose my will, that we will help Iraq become free and peaceful, that we will stand with those who want a new Iraq after Saddam Hussein to develop, where mothers and dads can raise their children in a peaceful world, where business and shopkeepers can grow their businesses, where the education system works well, where people can get good health. And I believe it’s possible.

And I call upon the Iraqi people to reject violence, band together to insist that the country move toward a peaceful tomorrow. Iraq is changing for the better. I mean, look at the soccer team. The Iraq soccer team is going to the Olympics as a proud—to represent a proud new country. And I’m excited. I’m excited for the Olympic team. I’m excited for the Iraqi people, and I look forward someday to greeting an Iraqi leader dedicated to peace and freedom, just like I’ve had the opportunity to greet you, as a fellow human being, as a person who—I respect people. I respect their religion. I respect human rights. I respect human dignity. And that’s the kind of society I know will grow up in Iraq.

This is historic times. They’re hard times. But there are better times ahead, but it requires courage and strength and will. And I want to thank you for coming to the White House. It’s been my pleasure to be with you, sir.

Q. I thank you very much, Mr. President, for this opportunity once again. And I hope that you will have many opportunities with the Iraqi press in the future.

The President. Yes, sir. Thank you. Very good.

NOTE: The interview began at 4:45 p.m. in the Library at the White House, and the transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on May 20. In his remarks, the President referred to Iraqi Governing Council President Izz al-Din al-Salim, who was killed in a suicide car bomb attack on May 17 in Baghdad; L. Paul Bremer III, Presidential Envoy to Iraq; former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; and Muqtada Al Sadr,

Iraqi Shiite cleric whose militia engaged in an uprising in Iraq that began in early April. The interviewer referred to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraqi Shiite leader. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Remarks Following Discussions With Prime Minister Konstandinos Karamanlis of Greece

May 20, 2004

President Bush. Thank you for coming. I've really been looking forward to this discussion with our friend. Welcome. It's the first chance I have to wish you a happy Name Day—tomorrow, isn't it?

Prime Minister Karamanlis. Tomorrow, you know about that?

President Bush. I know about that, and I'm glad to do so.

We will talk about a lot of subjects—we've already covered quite a few—and then I'm going to host a lunch with the Prime Minister here shortly.

One of the topics I do want to discuss is the Olympic Games, how excited I am for your country to host the Olympic Games. I wish I could attend, but this is a political season. So instead, I'm sending my father to lead our delegation.

I want to thank you for your very close cooperation, working together to make sure the games are successful, that people are able to travel to your beautiful country in as secure an environment as possible. You're making very good progress, Mr. Prime Minister, and I appreciate your hard work. I know your intentions are to have this the best possible games, and for that, I'm grateful.

I look forward to continuing our discussion over lunch, and of course, I want to congratulate you for your—for the victories you achieved and look forward to working with you. Welcome.

Prime Minister Karamanlis. Thank you very much, Mr. President, and I would like to thank you for your warm hospitality. And since you raised the question of the Olympic Games, I would like to take the opportunity to say that we are doing everything humanly possible in terms of energy, resources, professionals, to secure really successful games, and I'm confident that we'll succeed.

President Bush. Welcome.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:48 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.

Statement on House of Representatives Passage of Budget Legislation

May 20, 2004

I commend the House of Representatives for passing a responsible budget that meets our Nation's highest priorities of winning the war on terror, protecting the homeland, and helping our economy continue to create new jobs. This budget keeps tax relief flowing to married couples, families with children, and working people, while restraining overall spending and allowing the deficit to be cut in half in the next 5 years. I urge the Senate to follow the House's lead and pass this budget so that we can continue making progress on our shared agenda of building a safer, stronger, and better America.

Statement on the Anniversary of the Birth of the Republic of Cuba

May 20, 2004

On behalf of the people of the United States, I send greetings to all people of Cuban heritage who celebrate the anniversary of the birth of the Republic of Cuba.

We stand firmly with the 11 million Cubans who still suffer under the repressive Castro dictatorship, and who dream of a prosperous and free future.

The United States is working for the day when a free Cuba will rejoin the community of democracies in the Americas. We will vigorously implement the recommendations of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba so that Cuba will reflect the vision of the great Cuban patriot Jose Marti: "*Con todos y para el bien de todos.*" ("With all the people and for the good of all the people.")

May God bless the Cuban people.

NOTE: The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language version of this statement.