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President Bush Discusses the Iraqi Interim Government

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT ON IRAQI INTERIM GOVERNMENT
The Rose Garden

11:30 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Good morning. Today in Baghdad, U.N. Special Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, and Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, announced the members of Iraq's new interim government. Consulting with hundreds of Iraqis from a variety of backgrounds, Mr. Brahimi has recommended a team that possesses the talent, commitment and resolve to guide Iraq through the challenges that lie ahead.



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President's Remarks

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On June 30th, this interim government will assume full sovereignty and will oversee all ministries and all functions of the Iraqi state. Those ministries will report to Prime Minister Allawi, who will be responsible for the day-to-day operations of Iraq's interim government. Dr. Allawi is a strong leader. He endured exile for decades and survived assassination attempts by Saddam's regime. He was trained as a physician, has worked as a businessman and has always been an Iraqi patriot.

Prime Minister Allawi and Mr. Brahimi announced Iraq's interim President, Ghazi Al-Yawar, an engineer from northern Iraq. They also announced two deputy presidents, Dr. Ibrahim Jaafari, who is a physician born in Karbala; and Dr. Rowsch Shaways, a prominent political and military leader who also has been a long-time opponent of Saddam's tyranny.

The new 33-member cabinet announced today reflects new leadership, drawn from a broad cross section of Iraqis. Five are regional officials, six are women, and the vast majority of government ministries will have new ministers. The foremost tasks of this new interim government will be to prepare Iraq for a national election no later than January of next year, and to work with our coalition to provide the security that will make that election possible. That election will choose a transitional national assembly, the first freely elected, truly representative national governing body in Iraq's history.

Earlier today I spoke to Secretary General Kofi Annan. I congratulated him on the U.N.'s role in forming this new government. We also discussed the preparation for national elections and our common work on a new Security Council resolution that will express international support for Iraq's interim government, reaffirm the world's security commitment to the Iraqi people and encourage other U.N. members to join in the effort of building a free Iraq.

Last week, I outlined the five steps to helping Iraq achieve democracy and freedom. We will hand over authority to a sovereign Iraqi government, help establish security, continue rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure, encourage more international support and move toward a national election that will bring forward new leaders empowered by the Iraqi people. The naming of the new interim government brings us one step closer to realizing the dream of millions of Iraqis -- a fully sovereign nation with a representative government that protects their rights and serves their needs.

Many challenges remain. Today's violence underscores that freedom in Iraq is opposed by violent men who seek the failure not only of this interim government, but of all progress toward liberty. We will stand with the Iraqi people in defeating the enemies of freedom and those who oppose democracy in Iraq. The killers know that Iraq is the central front in the war on terror. The return of tyranny to Iraq would embolden the terrorists, leading to more bombings, more beheadings and more murders of the innocent around the world.

The rise of a free and self-governing Iraq will deny terrorists a base of operation, discredit their narrow ideology, and give momentum to reformers across the region. A free Iraq will be a decisive blow to terrorism at the heart of

its power, and a victory for the civilized world and for the security of America. The will of Iraqis and our coalition is firm. We will not be deterred by violence and terror. We will stand together and ensure that the future of Iraq is a future of freedom.

I'll take some questions. Hunt.

Q. Mr. President, you just spoke about more international support. With the new government and the expected Security Council resolution, do you expect -- what do you expect in the way of other countries to come forward with major pledges of troops for Iraq? And do you think there's going to be more violence as the turnover occurs?

THE PRESIDENT: I think, on the second half of that question, yes, I believe there will be more violence, because there are still violent people who want to stop progress. Listen, their strategy is -- hasn't changed. They want to kill innocent lives to shake our will and to discourage the people inside Iraq. That's what they want to do. And they're not going to shake our will. In terms of whether or not there would be a major -- you said major commitment of new troops? Is that the adjective you used, "major"?

Q Yes, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: I don't know if there will be a major commitment of new troops, but I think there will be a major focus on helping Iraq to become a free country. And the next step in this process is to get a United Nations Security Council resolution. And to this end, I have been speaking with a variety of world leaders to encourage them to -- by telling them we're willing to work with them to achieve language we can live with, but, more importantly, language that the Iraqi government can live with.

And Kofi and I talked today, and he wants to hear from the new Iraqi government, and I don't blame him. And we heard from the new Iraqi government, by the way, today, and the new Prime Minister who stood up and thanked the American people, for which I was grateful. He was speaking to the -- to the mothers and dads and wives and husbands of our brave troops who have helped them become a free country, and I appreciated his strong statement. Steve.

Q Sir, were you surprised at the way the Governing Council took command of the selection process? And are you concerned that the new President has had some criticisms of the United States?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I don't -- from my perspective, Mr. Brahimi made the decisions and brought their names to the Governing Council. As I understand it, the Governing Council simply opined about names. It was Mr. Brahimi's selections and -- Ambassador Bremer and Ambassador Blackwill were instructed by me to work with Mr. Brahimi. As we say in American sports parlance, he was the quarterback. And it seemed like a good group to me. I mean, they're diverse, as I mentioned, a number of women are now involved in the government, which is a positive step for the citizens of Iraq. Go ahead.

Q The new President has had some criticisms of the United States. Are you --

THE PRESIDENT: The new President has had some criticisms?

Q -- concerned about that?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, Mr. Brahimi put together a government that's going to be, first and foremost, loyal to the Iraqi people. And that's important. It's a government with which I believe we can work. Mr. Allawi said some strong statements today about security matters on the ground, about how he wants to work with the coalition forces to provide security so that the country can go toward elections. But, you know, I'm -- what I'm most for is for people who are willing to work toward a free Iraq. That's my concern. And it sounds like to me that these men are patriots, men and women are patriots who believe in the future of Iraq. And if there is some criticism of the United States, so be it. The end result is a peaceful Iraq in the heart of the Middle East. Gregory.

Q Mr. President, this new Iraqi government and others on the Security Council have expressed an interest in this interim government having substantial power over decisions -- military security decisions. This government has been clear that when it comes to protecting U.S. troops, American commanders will do everything that has to be

done.

THE PRESIDENT: Right.

Q Well, as you go to Europe now, in the next couple of days, what are you prepared to do to bridge that gap, to give this new independent government the sort of independence it's really asking for, while retaining this essential role that you have to have in, you know, securing Iraq?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I think -- listen, the American people need to be assured that if our troops are in harm way -- in harm's way, they will -- they will be able to defend themselves without having to check with anybody else, other than their commander. At the same time, I can assure the Iraqi citizens, as well as our friends in Europe, that we have done these kind of security arrangements before -- witness, Afghanistan, there is a sovereign government in Afghanistan, there are U.S. troops and coalition troops there, and they're working very well together. The Iraqis will have their own chain of command. And that's going to be very important. In other words, the Iraqi army will report up to a chain of command of Iraqis, not coalitions or Americans. And I think that's going to be an important part of the spirit and the capabilities of an Iraqi army. But I'm confident we can bridge any gap, David, because we have done it in country after country. Terry.

Q Mr. President, some will see the presence of Iraqi exiles -- some of whom have received money from the United States government in the past -- as proof, in their minds, that this is a puppet government of the United States. Could you answer that criticism? And explain what role, if any, you had in the names, as they --

THE PRESIDENT: I had no role. I mean, occasionally, somebody said, this person may be interested, or that -- but I had no role in picking, zero. Secondly, in terms of whether or not our government helped, we did help some of the figures now in the interim government. We helped them because they were fierce anti-Saddam people. We helped their organizations, which were -- which believed that the tyranny of Saddam was bad for the Iraqi people.

Now, it's going to be up to the leaders to prove their worth to the Iraqi citizens. In other words, the leaders are going to have to show the Iraqis that they're independent, smart, capable, nationalistic, and believe in the future of Iraq. And our job is to work with them.

But the decision-making process is very important for our citizens to understand. The decision-making process is changing. Bremer comes home and the new government replaces Ambassador Bremer. And at the same time, we stand up an embassy that will interface with the new, sovereign Iraqi government.

One of the interesting things I've heard, Terry, from other leaders, are you really going to pass full sovereignty? And the answer is, yes, we're going to pass full sovereignty. And the Iraqi government will need the help of a lot of people. And we're willing to be a participant in helping them get to the elections.

And Terry asked whether there will be more violence. I think there will be. You know, I hate to predict violence, but I just understand the nature of the killers. This guy, Zarqawi, an al Qaeda associate -- who was in Baghdad, by the way, prior to the removal of Saddam Hussein -- is still at large in Iraq. And as you might remember, part of his operational plan was to sow violence and discord amongst the various groups in Iraq by cold-blooded killing. And we need to help find Zarqawi so that the people of Iraq can have a more bright -- bright future.

The other thing we've got to do is work on reconstruction, to help rebuild parts of that country that suffered mightily under Saddam and are being, you know -- parts of which are being destroyed by these -- by these terrorists. Plante.

Q Mr. President, if the decision-making is not fully in the hands of the Iraqis, will that extend to them asking us to leave, pull out U.S. troops? And will you accede to that if they ask?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, Mr. Allawi said today the troops need to be there. And so --

Q But all of them?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, whatever it takes to get the mission done. And we look forward to working with the Iraq

Prime Minister and the Iraq Defense Minister to help secure the country. As you know, circumstances change on the ground and I've told the American people and our commanders that we'll be flexible and we'll meet those circumstances as they arise.

And what is important for the American people to know is that if a troop is in harm's way, that troop -- the chain of command of that troop will be to a U.S. military commander. In terms of the strategy as to how to help Iraq become secure enough to have free elections, we'll work closely with the new Iraqi government to achieve those objectives. There may be times when the Iraqis say, we can handle this ourselves, get out of the way; we're plenty capable of moving into secure a town or to secure a situation. And there may be times when they say, you know, we've got our hands full, why don't you join us in an operation. And we will collaborate closely with the new defense ministry.

It's a change of attitude in Iraq, in that they now have got the decision-making capabilities. Mr. Allawi today, I repeat, stood up in front of the world and said two things that caught my attention. One, he thanked America, and I appreciated that a lot. And I think the American people needed to hear that, that in the new leader there is this understanding and appreciation for the sacrifices that our country has been through. And he also said, we look forward to working with the coalition and forces to help secure the country.

Q Given the perception --

THE PRESIDENT: I'm converting this into a full-blown press conference; it's such a beautiful day. (Laughter.) Do I get credit for it? (Laughter.)

Q Absolutely.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, good.

Q Given the perception out there, especially in Iraq and among some at the U.N. that Brahimi was strong armed, are you confident that this new interim government has enough legitimacy within Iraq to hold together all the various factions there that threaten to go at each other's throats?

THE PRESIDENT: I think that's a -- listen, yes, I am confident. But time will tell whether or not the leaders turn out to be as capable and strong as Mr. Brahimi thinks they will be.

One of the things I think, Richard, that will keep the country intact is the -- is this notion of free elections. I mean, it appears to me that one of the things that does unite the Iraqi people is the deep desire to be able to elect their government. And as we head toward free elections, I think it will make it easier for the interim government to do their job. Eddie.

Q Mr. President --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, Ed, I'm anxiously awaiting.

Q I'd like ask you about your goals for this -- your trip coming up later this week to Europe, vis-a-vis your plan on the Middle East peace initiative. What do you hope in a concrete way to bring home?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm giving a speech at the Air Force Academy that will help answer your question.

Q I won't be there. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Ed, they do have C-Span, you know. (Laughter.) I'll be glad to rent it for you for an hour. (Laughter.)

I'm going to talk about the war on terror, the clash of ideology. Part of winning the war on terror is to spread freedom and democracy in the Middle East. The speech will help set up the types of conversations I will continue to have overseas and at Sea Island, Georgia -- which is the need for us to understand that democracy can take

hold in the Middle East.

It's important for our partners to understand that I don't view it as American democracy, nor do I think it's going to happen overnight. I will remind them that the Articles of Confederation was a rather bumpy period for American democracy. And so we're talking about reform in their image, but reform at the insistence and help -- with the help of the free world.

And I think it's possible and I know it's necessary that we work toward democracy in the Middle East. Because a society that is not free and not democratic is a society that's likely to breed resentment and anger. And, therefore, a society that is -- makes the recruitment of young terrorists more likely.

And that's what -- and so the idea is to find common spirit and our willingness to work in a variety of ways in the greater Middle East to achieve democratic societies to work with reformers, to work on education processes that teach people to read and write and add and subtract, not to hate. And always reminding people that the war on terror is not a war against a particular religion, and that the war on terror is not a war against a particular civilization. It's a war against people who have got this perverted vision about what the world should look like.

And at my Air Force Academy speech, which you won't be at, I'll remind people that part of their objective is to drive the United States from a country -- countries in the Middle East, so that they can flow their hatred into a vacuum. And it's very important that we not retreat. But not only stay the ground, but also work toward democratic institutions and reform.

Yes, sir.

Q Mr. President, are you confident this interim government wants U.S. troops to stay, at least for the short-term?

THE PRESIDENT: I am confident, yes, sir. And I am confident because of the remarks of Mr. Allawi, and I am told by people on the ground there that they feel -- that they, the Iraqis, feel comfortable in asking for us to stay so that we can help provide the security.

Listen, the Iraqis I have talked to are the first to say that the security situation must be improved. And they recognize that there is a lot of work between now and the election in order to improve the security situation, starting with making sure the chain of command within the Iraqi army and the civilian forces and the police forces is strong and linked. As well as to make sure that these Iraqi forces are equipped and properly trained.

As I said in the statement last Monday, a week ago yesterday, that we saw that there were some weaknesses on the ground in Iraq when the heat got on. Some didn't stand up and do their duty, and we're addressing those weaknesses now. And it's going to take time to fully address them.

But there is a deep desire by the Iraqis, don't get me wrong, to run their own affairs, and to be in a position where they can handle their own security measures. And I think they will be in that position.

But I know that they're not going to ask us to depart until they're comfortable in that position. And Mr. Allawi, again, I referred to his statements today. I thought they were good strong statements.

Yes.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. Chalabi is an Iraqi leader that's fallen out of favor within your administration. I'm wondering if you feel that he provided any false information, or are you particularly --

THE PRESIDENT: Chalabi?

Q Yes, with Chalabi.

THE PRESIDENT: My meetings with him were very brief. I mean, I think I met with him at the State of the Union and just kind of working through the rope line, and he might have come with a group of leaders. But I haven't had

any extensive conversations with him.

Mr. Brahimi made the decision on Chalabi, not the United States. Mr. Brahimi was the person that put together the group. And I haven't spoken to him or anybody on the ground as to why Chalabi wasn't taken.

In terms of information --

Q I guess I'm asking, do you feel like he misled your administration, in terms of what the expectations were going to be going into Iraq?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't remember anybody walking into my office saying, Chalabi says this is the way it's going to be in Iraq.

Let me step back there and remind you that going into Iraq, we had some -- we had a belief that certain things -- that we had to plan for certain courses of action. One, that the oil production, the Iraqi oil production would be disrupted through sabotage or Saddam's own whims. And it didn't happen. We also thought there would be major refugee flows -- that didn't happen -- or a lot of hunger, and it didn't happen.

What did happen was, as a result of us storming through the country, many of Saddam's elite guard kind of saw what was happening -- laid down -- well, didn't lay down their arms -- stored their arms and hid, and then regrouped. As well as what happened was is that some of the foreign fighters there were encouraged and bolstered by a foreign fighter that had been there during the period, Mr. Zarqawi. And it's been tough, tough fighting. I fully recognize that.

However, I just want to remind you that the mission of the enemy is to get us to retreat from Iraq. Is to say, well, it's been tough enough, now it's time to go home -- which we are not going to do. We will stand with this Iraqi government.

Today, the reason I'm out here is because this is a major step toward the emergence of a free Iraq. This is a very hopeful day for the Iraqi people, and a hopeful day for the American people, because the American people want to see a free Iraq as well. They understand what I know. A free Iraq in the heart of the Middle East is going to be a game-changer, an agent of change. It's going to send a clear signal that the terrorists can't win and that -- and that a free society is a better way to lift the hopes and aspirations of the average person.

Yes, Holly.

Q So far, sir, Congress hasn't responded to your call to do anything about rising oil prices. I mean, you've already said you want them to pass your energy bill, and they aren't. So what are you --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, so go ask Congress why they haven't passed the energy bill. And I'll repeat it again: Congress, pass the energy bill.

Q But what more can you do as prices rise?

THE PRESIDENT: I can continue calling upon Congress to pass the energy bill and to make sure the American consumers are being treated fairly. But what you're seeing at the gas pumps is something I've been warning for two years, and that is that we're hooked on foreign sources of energy. And that if we don't become less dependent on foreign sources of energy, we will find higher prices at our gas pumps. It's precisely what happened.

Had we drilled in ANWR back in the mid-'90s, we'd be producing an additional million barrels a day, which would be taking enormous pressure off the American consumer.

Yes, ma'am.

Q Mr. President, you were saying the United States wants to stand with Iraqi people. Would you like to go to Iraq

before the end of the year and stand with the interim government and --

THE PRESIDENT: I would like to, but I'm not so sure that would be wise, yet.

Q It's not secure?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't know. You're asking me to project six months down the road -- five months down the road. And that's the classic hypothetical. Will Iraq be secure enough for me to go to Iraq? I would hope it would be. And if it is, then whether or not I can go is another question.

Q Would you like to go, though?

THE PRESIDENT: I'd love to go back to Iraq at some point in time, I really would. I'd like to be able to stand up and say, let me tell you something about America. America is a land that's willing to sacrifice on your behalf. We sent our sons and daughters here so you can be free. And not only that, we are a compassionate country. We want to help you rebuild your schools and your hospitals. I'd like to do that, I really would.

I'd like to also go to Afghanistan. And, by the way, the reports from Afghanistan, at least the ones I get, are very encouraging. You know, we've got people who have been there last year and have been back this year report a different attitude. And they report people have got a sparkle in their eye. And women now all of a sudden no longer fear the future but believe that we're there to stay the course and we will help a free society emerge.

Both of which, a free society and a free Afghanistan, are very important to a future, a future world that is peaceful. Because freedom is the bulwark of the value system inculcated in those countries.

Yes. Yes, you, Dallas Morning News. Hillman.

Q How close are you to an agreement with the United Nations for a new resolution on Iraq?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think our negotiator, the Secretary of State, feels we're making good progress.

Q A week? Two weeks?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't know, Hillman. That's like saying, can I go to Iraq in five months. Please. I thought I set the tone for hypotheticals. I don't know what it is.

But as soon as possible -- I'd like to get it done tomorrow, if possible. And so we're working with all the parties. But you know how the United Nations is. Sometimes it can move slowly and sometimes it can move quickly, and the quicker the better as far as I'm concerned, because it sends a message to the new Iraqi government, the world stands with you.

Yes, sir. Only one question per major paper. Nice try. (Laughter.)

Q You're about to have a series of meetings with foreign leaders in which Iraq certainly will loom very large. You ruled out, a moment ago, when you said you don't expect a major commitment of troops to come out of those meetings.

THE PRESIDENT: Right.

Q What, realistically, do you expect to come out of these meetings regarding --

THE PRESIDENT: A commitment to work together, a commitment that we all understand the importance of succeeding in Iraq. An understanding that terrorism will flourish and be emboldened if we're not successful in promoting a free government in Iraq. And a -- and I think, from my conversations, people understand that. But it will give us a chance to sit in the same room and talk about that. And that's an important commitment.

In other words, once you get that in your mind that a free Iraq is important for world security, then it makes it easier for us to work together on certain matters. And, look, we're still getting beyond the period where we had disagreements about Iraq and now there's common ground, that a free Iraq is essential to our respective securities. And, more important, is a very important signal to people in the Middle East that it's possible to live in a free society. And that's an important message, as well.

It's important for the Iranian -- those who love freedom in Iran to see. I mean, listen, a free Iraq on the border of Iran is going to send a very clear signal to those who want to be free, that a free society is very possible. It's a hopeful period. And I'm so appreciative of the United Nations and Mr. Brahimi's work. It's hard work to do what he did. He did a lot of good work and came up with what looks like a very strong government.

Deans, fine looking suit -- the white is back, so are the bucks. (Laughter.)

Q Thank you, sir. Mr. President, there have been several questions about this tightly sequenced statesmanship you have coming up in the next several weeks. I'm wondering if you can say -- or do you expect -- how soon do you think representatives of this interim government will actually go to the U.N. Security Council and plead their case for a resolution?

THE PRESIDENT: Right.

Q And, two, do you expect to use the G8, do you have the -- will the resolution be on the agenda there at the G8? And where do you think we'll be by the time we get to Istanbul?

THE PRESIDENT: I would hope that the new government sends somebody to New York soon. As a matter of fact, I don't think you're going to see much on the resolution, to answer your question, Bob, until the Iraqis come and make their case about why a resolution is needed. And I would like to see that person come as quickly as possible.

We are going to have leaders from the greater Middle East in Sea Island. And as to whether or not a member of the new government shows up in Sea Island from Iraq, I just don't know. But we will talk about Iraq. We'll talk about Iraq in the context of the spread of democracy. And the countries that will be there will be sharing their experiences with democratic institutions in the Muslim world. And that will also serve as a reminder to the people of Iraq that they can succeed.

In terms of NATO, obviously we'll be discussing Iraq at NATO. Again, I don't expect any additional troop commitments out of NATO. I do expect there to be continuing NATO interest in Iraq. As you know, NATO has provided a headquarters, or support for the Polish multinational division -- Polish-led multinational division. But we'll also make sure that we continue to focus NATO on Afghanistan. A peaceful and free Afghanistan is essential to the -- to our mission, to our objectives of encouraging the spread of democracy.

President Karzai, who I believe is coming soon -- and will be at Sea Island by the way -- another good example of someone who has assumed responsibility in a country that had been savaged by barbaric leadership, is doing a fine job. And he will be able to help people understand how to ask for help, as well as what help is available. I am very impressed by him and impressed by his leadership.

Last question.

Q Mr. President --

Q Mr. President, could you speak about Sudan, the peace agreement in Sudan and how that nation has turned away from terrorism?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I appreciate that. The question is on Sudan. Recently, there was a signature on a document that took us a step closer toward achieving our objective. However, it is very important for the Sudanese government to understand we're watching very carefully, the hunger, the brutal human conditions in the western part of their country, and that we expect there to be an accommodation to the relief agencies as well as the American government to get aid to those people. We're closer to an agreement in Sudan, it's a very

important agreement. And we will continue to work the issue really hard.

Q Mr. President, can I ask about one of the things that the new Prime Minister in Iraq has said about your administration? He has said that many of the postwar problems in Iraq have been from lack of proper planning, and that America bears direct responsibility for that. How do you answer that?

THE PRESIDENT: I would answer him that we had a plan in place, we succeeded in making sure that the oil flow continues so that he as Prime Minister has now got roughly 2.5 million barrels a day of Iraqi oil for the benefit of the Iraqi people, that there wasn't major disruptions of food, so that people didn't starve. In other words, we were very successful in certain things.

But there is no question that the security situation on the ground is hard and tough. And my comment to him is, we will be flexible and wise and work with him to continue to secure Iraq; that our mission is his mission, which is to get to elections so the country can be a free country.

Again, I think it's instructive that Mr. Brahimi picked leaders who are willing to speak their mind, which is fine with me. I fully understand a leader willing to speak their mind. I kind of like doing it myself, you know. And all the new Prime Minister needs to know is that I look forward to a close relationship with him, to do what's best for the Iraqi people. That's our interest. Our interest is a free Iraq. It's in their interest and it's in the world's interest. And it's something -- these are historic times. And I am pleased with the progress, the political progress being made today, and vow to the people of Iraq that we will finish the mission. We will do our job. And we expect them to do their job and will work with them to do so.

Thank you all very much. END 12:06 P.M. EDT

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