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President Addresses Nation, Discusses Iraq, War on Terror

Fort Bragg, North Carolina

8:02 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Please be seated. Good evening. I'm pleased to visit Fort Bragg, "Home of the Airborne and Special Operations Forces." It's an honor to speak before you tonight.

My greatest responsibility as President is to protect the American people. And that's your calling, as well. I thank you for your service, your courage and your sacrifice. I thank your families, who support you in your vital work. The soldiers and families of Fort Bragg have contributed mightily to our efforts to secure our country and promote peace. America is grateful, and so is your Commander-in-Chief.

The troops here and across the world are fighting a global war on terror. The war reached our shores on September the 11th, 2001. The terrorists who attacked us -- and the terrorists we face -- murder in the name of a totalitarian ideology that hates freedom, rejects tolerance, and despises all dissent. Their aim is to remake the Middle East in their own grim image of tyranny and oppression -- by toppling governments, by driving us out of the region, and by exporting terror.

To achieve these aims, they have continued to kill -- in Madrid, Istanbul, Jakarta, Casablanca, Riyadh, Bali, and elsewhere. The terrorists believe that free societies are essentially corrupt and decadent, and with a few hard blows they can force us to retreat. They are mistaken. After September the 11th, I made a commitment to the American people: This nation will not wait to be attacked again. We will defend our freedom. We will take the fight to the enemy.

Iraq is the latest battlefield in this war. Many terrorists who kill innocent men, women, and children on the streets of Baghdad are followers of the same murderous ideology that took the lives of our citizens in New York, in Washington, and Pennsylvania. There is only one course of action against them: to defeat them abroad before they attack us at home. The commander in charge of coalition operations in Iraq -- who is also senior commander at this base -- General John Vines, put it well the other day. He said: "We either deal with terrorism and this extremism abroad, or we deal with it when it comes to us."

Our mission in Iraq is clear. We're hunting down the terrorists. We're helping Iraqis build a free nation that is an ally in the war on terror. We're advancing freedom in the broader Middle East. We are removing a source of violence and instability, and laying the foundation of peace for our children and our grandchildren.

The work in Iraq is difficult and it is dangerous. Like most Americans, I see the images of violence and bloodshed. Every picture is horrifying, and the suffering is real. Amid all this violence, I know Americans ask the question: Is the sacrifice worth it? It is worth it, and it is vital to the future security of our country. And tonight I will explain the reasons why.

Some of the violence you see in Iraq is being carried out by ruthless killers who are converging on Iraq to fight the advance of peace and freedom. Our military reports that we have killed or captured hundreds of foreign fighters in Iraq who have come from Saudi Arabia and Syria, Iran, Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, Libya and others. They are making common cause with criminal elements, Iraqi insurgents, and remnants of Saddam Hussein's regime who want to restore the old order. They fight because they know that the survival of their hateful ideology is at stake. They know that as freedom takes root in Iraq, it will inspire millions across the Middle East to claim their liberty, as well. And when the Middle East grows in democracy and prosperity and hope, the terrorists will lose their sponsors, lose their recruits, and lose their hopes for turning that region into a base for attacks on America and our allies around the world.

Some wonder whether Iraq is a central front in the war on terror. Among the terrorists, there is no debate. Hear the words of Osama Bin Laden: "This Third World War is raging" in Iraq. "The whole world is watching this war." He says it will end in "victory and glory, or misery and humiliation."

The terrorists know that the outcome will leave them emboldened, or defeated. So they are waging a campaign of murder and destruction. And there is no limit to the innocent lives they are willing to take.

We see the nature of the enemy in terrorists who exploded car bombs along a busy shopping street in Baghdad, including one outside a mosque. We see the nature of the enemy in terrorists who sent a suicide bomber to a teaching hospital in Mosul. We see the nature of the enemy in terrorists who behead civilian hostages and broadcast their atrocities for the world to see.

These are savage acts of violence, but they have not brought the terrorists any closer to achieving their strategic objectives. The terrorists -- both foreign and Iraqi -- failed to stop the transfer of sovereignty. They failed to break our Coalition and force a mass withdrawal by our allies. They failed to incite an Iraqi civil war. They failed to prevent free elections. They failed to stop the formation of a democratic Iraqi government that represents all of Iraq's diverse population. And they failed to stop Iraqis from signing up in large number with the police forces and the army to defend their new democracy.

The lesson of this experience is clear: The terrorists can kill the innocent, but they cannot stop the advance of freedom. The only way our enemies can succeed is if we forget the lessons of September the 11th, if we abandon the Iraqi people to men like Zarqawi, and if we yield the future of the Middle East to men like Bin Laden. For the sake of our nation's security, this will not happen on my watch.

A little over a year ago, I spoke to the nation and described our coalition's goals in Iraq. I said that America's mission in Iraq is to defeat an enemy and give strength to a friend -- a free, representative government that is an ally in the war on terror, and a beacon of hope in a part of the world that is desperate for reform. I outlined the steps we would take to achieve this goal: We would hand authority over to a sovereign Iraqi government. We would help Iraqis hold free elections by January 2005. We would continue helping Iraqis rebuild their nation's infrastructure and economy. We would encourage more international support for Iraq's democratic transition, and we would enable Iraqis to take increasing responsibility for their own security and stability.

In the past year, we have made significant progress. One year ago today, we restored sovereignty to the Iraqi people. In January 2005, more than 8 million Iraqi men and women voted in elections that were free and fair, and took time on -- and took place on time. We continued our efforts to help them rebuild their country. Rebuilding a country after three decades of tyranny is hard, and rebuilding while at war is even harder. Our progress has been uneven, but progress is being made.

We're improving roads and schools and health clinics. We're working to improve basic services like sanitation, electricity, and water. And together with our allies, we'll help the new Iraqi government deliver a better life for its citizens.

In the past year, the international community has stepped forward with vital assistance. Some 30 nations have troops in Iraq, and many others are contributing non-military assistance. The United Nations is in Iraq to help Iraqis write a constitution and conduct their next elections. Thus far, some 40 countries and three international organizations have pledged about \$34 billion in assistance for Iraqi reconstruction. More than 80 countries and international organizations recently came together in Brussels to coordinate their efforts to help Iraqis provide for their security and rebuild their country. And next month, donor countries will meet in Jordan to support Iraqi reconstruction.

Whatever our differences in the past, the world understands that success in Iraq is critical to the security of our nations. As German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder said at the White House yesterday, "There can be no question a stable and democratic Iraq is in the vested interest of not just Germany, but also Europe." Finally, we have continued our efforts to equip and train Iraqi security forces. We made gains in both the number and quality of those forces. Today Iraq has more than 160,000 security forces trained and equipped for a variety of missions. Iraqi forces have fought bravely, helping to capture terrorists and insurgents in Najaf and Samarra, Fallujah and Mosul. And in the past month, Iraqi forces have led a major anti-terrorist campaign in Baghdad called Operation Lightning, which has led to the capture of hundreds of suspected insurgents. Like free people everywhere, Iraqis want to be defended by their own countrymen, and we are helping Iraqis assume those duties.

The progress in the past year has been significant, and we have a clear path forward. To complete the mission, we will continue to hunt down the terrorists and insurgents. To complete the mission, we will prevent al Qaeda and other foreign terrorists from turning Iraq into what Afghanistan was under the Taliban, a safe haven from which they could launch attacks on America and our friends. And the best way to complete the mission is to help Iraqis build a free nation that can govern itself, sustain itself, and defend itself.

So our strategy going forward has both a military track and a political track. The principal task of our military is to find and defeat the terrorists, and that is why we are on the offense. And as we pursue the terrorists, our military is helping to train Iraqi security forces so that they can defend their people and fight the enemy on their own. Our strategy can be summed up this way: As the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down.

We've made progress, but we have a lot of -- a lot more work to do. Today Iraqi security forces are at different levels of readiness. Some are capable of taking on the terrorists and insurgents by themselves. A large number can plan and execute anti-terrorist operations with coalition support. The rest are forming and not yet ready to participate fully in security operations. Our task is to make the Iraqi units fully capable and independent. We're building up Iraqi security forces as quickly as possible, so they can assume the lead in defeating the terrorists and insurgents.

Our coalition is devoting considerable resources and manpower to this critical task. Thousands of coalition troops are involved in the training and equipping of Iraqi security forces. NATO is establishing a military academy near Baghdad to train the next generation of Iraqi military leaders, and 17 nations are contributing troops to the NATO training mission. Iraqi army and police are being trained by personnel from Italy, Germany, Ukraine, Turkey, Poland, Romania, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Today, dozens of nations are working toward a common objective: an Iraq that can defend itself, defeat its enemies, and secure its freedom.

To further prepare Iraqi forces to fight the enemy on their own, we are taking three new steps: First, we are partnering coalition units with Iraqi units. These coalition-Iraqi teams are conducting operations together in the field. These combined operations are giving Iraqis a chance to experience how the most professional armed forces in the world operate in combat.

Second, we are embedding coalition "transition teams" inside Iraqi units. These teams are made up of coalition officers and non-commissioned officers who live, work, and fight together with their Iraqi comrades. Under U.S. command, they are providing battlefield advice and assistance to Iraqi forces during combat operations. Between battles, they are assisting the Iraqis with important skills, such as urban combat, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance techniques.

Third, we're working with the Iraqi Ministries of Interior and Defense to improve their capabilities to coordinate anti-terrorist operations. We're helping them develop command and control structures. We're also providing them with civilian and military leadership training, so Iraq's new leaders can effectively manage their forces in the fight against terror.

The new Iraqi security forces are proving their courage every day. More than 2,000 members of Iraqi security forces have given their lives in the line of duty. Thousands more have stepped forward, and are now training to serve their nation. With each engagement, Iraqi soldiers grow more battle-hardened, and their officers grow more experienced. We've learned that Iraqis are courageous and that they need additional skills. And that is why a major part of our mission is to train them so they can do the fighting, and then our troops can come home.

I recognize that Americans want our troops to come home as quickly as possible. So do I. Some contend that we should set a deadline for withdrawing U.S. forces. Let me explain why that would be a serious mistake. Setting an artificial timetable would send the wrong message to the Iraqis, who need to know that America will not leave before the job is done. It would send the wrong message to our troops, who need to know that we are serious about completing the mission they are risking their lives to achieve. And it would send the wrong message to the enemy, who would know that all they have to do is to wait us out. We will stay in Iraq as long as we are needed, and not a day longer.

Some Americans ask me, if completing the mission is so important, why don't you send more troops? If our commanders on the ground say we need more troops, I will send them. But our commanders tell me they have the number of troops they need to do their job. Sending more Americans would undermine our strategy of encouraging Iraqis to take the lead in this fight. And sending more Americans would suggest that we intend to stay forever, when we are, in fact, working for the day when Iraq can defend itself and we can leave. As we determine the right force level, our troops can know that I will continue to be guided by the advice that matters: the sober judgment of our military leaders.

The other critical element of our strategy is to help ensure that the hopes Iraqis expressed at the polls in January are translated into a secure democracy. The Iraqi people are emerging from decades of tyranny and oppression. Under the regime of Saddam Hussein, the Shia and Kurds were brutally oppressed, and the vast majority of Sunni Arabs were also denied their basic rights, while senior regime officials enjoyed the privileges of unchecked power. The challenge facing Iraqis today is to put this past behind them, and come together to build a new Iraq that includes all of its people.

They're doing that by building the institutions of a free society, a society based on freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of religion, and equal justice under law. The Iraqis have held free elections and established a Transitional National Assembly. The next step is to write a good constitution that enshrines these freedoms in permanent law. The Assembly plans to

expand its constitutional drafting committee to include more Sunni Arabs. Many Sunnis who opposed the January elections are now taking part in the democratic process, and that is essential to Iraq's future.

After a constitution is written, the Iraqi people will have a chance to vote on it. If approved, Iraqis will go to the polls again, to elect a new government under their new, permanent constitution. By taking these critical steps and meeting their deadlines, Iraqis will bind their multiethnic society together in a democracy that respects the will of the majority and protects minority rights.

As Iraqis grow confident that the democratic progress they are making is real and permanent, more will join the political process. And as Iraqis see that their military can protect them, more will step forward with vital intelligence to help defeat the enemies of a free Iraq. The combination of political and military reform will lay a solid foundation for a free and stable Iraq.

As Iraqis make progress toward a free society, the effects are being felt beyond Iraq's borders. Before our coalition liberated Iraq, Libya was secretly pursuing nuclear weapons. Today the leader of Libya has given up his chemical and nuclear weapons programs. Across the broader Middle East, people are claiming their freedom. In the last few months, we've witnessed elections in the Palestinian Territories and Lebanon. These elections are inspiring democratic reformers in places like Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Our strategy to defend ourselves and spread freedom is working. The rise of freedom in this vital region will eliminate the conditions that feed radicalism and ideologies of murder, and make our nation safer.

We have more work to do, and there will be tough moments that test America's resolve. We're fighting against men with blind hatred -- and armed with lethal weapons -- who are capable of any atrocity. They wear no uniform; they respect no laws of warfare or morality. They take innocent lives to create chaos for the cameras. They are trying to shake our will in Iraq, just as they tried to shake our will on September the 11th, 2001. They will fail. The terrorists do not understand America. The American people do not falter under threat, and we will not allow our future to be determined by car bombers and assassins.

America and our friends are in a conflict that demands much of us. It demands the courage of our fighting men and women, it demands the steadfastness of our allies, and it demands the perseverance of our citizens. We accept these burdens, because we know what is at stake. We fight today because Iraq now carries the hope of freedom in a vital region of the world, and the rise of democracy will be the ultimate triumph over radicalism and terror. And we fight today because terrorists want to attack our country and kill our citizens, and Iraq is where they are making their stand. So we'll fight them there, we'll fight them across the world, and we will stay in the fight until the fight is won. (Applause.)

America has done difficult work before. From our desperate fight for independence to the darkest days of a Civil War, to the hard-fought battles against tyranny in the 20th century, there were many chances to lose our heart, our nerve, or our way. But Americans have always held firm, because we have always believed in certain truths. We know that if evil is not confronted, it gains in strength and audacity, and returns to strike us again. We know that when the work is hard, the proper response is not retreat, it is courage. And we know that this great ideal of human freedom entrusted to us in a special way, and that the ideal of liberty is worth defending.

In this time of testing, our troops can know: The American people are behind you. Next week, our nation has an opportunity to make sure that support is felt by every soldier, sailor, airman, Coast Guardsman, and Marine at every outpost across the world. This Fourth of July, I ask you to find a way to thank the men and women defending our freedom -- by flying the flag, sending a letter to our troops in the field, or helping the military family down the street. The Department of Defense has set up a website -- AmericaSupportsYou.mil. You can go there to learn about private efforts

in your own community. At this time when we celebrate our freedom, let us stand with the men and women who defend us all.

To the soldiers in this hall, and our servicemen and women across the globe: I thank you for your courage under fire and your service to our nation. I thank our military families -- the burden of war falls especially hard on you. In this war, we have lost good men and women who left our shores to defend freedom and did not live to make the journey home. I've met with families grieving the loss of loved ones who were taken from us too soon. I've been inspired by their strength in the face of such great loss. We pray for the families. And the best way to honor the lives that have been given in this struggle is to complete the mission.

I thank those of you who have re-enlisted in an hour when your country needs you. And to those watching tonight who are considering a military career, there is no higher calling than service in our Armed Forces. We live in freedom because every generation has produced patriots willing to serve a cause greater than themselves. Those who serve today are taking their rightful place among the greatest generations that have worn our nation's uniform. When the history of this period is written, the liberation of Afghanistan and the liberation of Iraq will be remembered as great turning points in the story of freedom.

After September the 11th, 2001, I told the American people that the road ahead would be difficult, and that we would prevail. Well, it has been difficult -- and we are prevailing. Our enemies are brutal, but they are no match for the United States of America, and they are no match for the men and women of the United States military.

May God bless you all. (Applause.)

END 8:30 P.M. EDT