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HOMELAND SECURITY



Press Conference of the President

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The Rose Garden

11:15 A.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: It's always a pleasure to be introduced into the Rose Garden. Thank you, Wendell. Thank you for coming. I'm looking forward to answering some of your questions.

This week our nation paused to mark the 5th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. It was a tough day for a lot of our citizens. I was so honored to meet with family members and first responders, workers at the Pentagon, all who still had heaviness in their heart. But they asked me a question, you know, they kept asking me, what do you think the level of determination for this country is in order to protect ourselves, is what they want to know.

You know, for me, it was a reminder about how I felt right after 9/11. I felt a sense of determination and conviction about doing everything that is necessary to protect the people. I'm going to go back to New York to address the United Nations General Assembly. I'm going to talk to world leaders gathered there about our obligation to defend civilization and liberty, to support the forces of freedom and moderation throughout the Middle East. As we work with the international community to defeat the terrorists and extremists, to provide an alternative to their hateful ideology, we must also provide our military and intelligence professionals with the tools they need to protect our country from another attack. And the reason they need those tools is because the enemy wants to attack us again.

Right here in the Oval Office, I get briefed nearly every morning about the nature of this world, and I get briefed about the desire of an enemy to hurt America. And it's a sobering experience, as I'm sure you can imagine. I wish that weren't the case, you know. But it is the case. And, therefore, I believe it is vital that our folks on the front line have the tools necessary to protect the American people.

There are two vital pieces of legislation in Congress now that I think are necessary to help us win the war on terror. We will work with members of both parties to get legislation that works out of the Congress. The first bill will allow us to use military commissions to try suspected terrorists for war crimes. We need the legislation because the Supreme Court recently ruled that military commissions must be explicitly authorized by Congress. So we're working with Congress. The Supreme Court said, you must work with Congress; we are working with Congress to get a good piece of legislation out.

The bill I have proposed will ensure that suspected terrorists will receive full and fair trials, without revealing to them our nation's sensitive intelligence secrets. As soon as Congress acts on this bill, the man our intelligence agencies believe helped orchestrate the 9/11 attacks can face justice.

The bill would also provide clear rules for our personnel involved in detaining and questioning captured terrorists. The information that the Central Intelligence Agency has obtained by questioning men like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed has provided valuable information and has helped disrupt terrorist plots, including strikes within the United States.

For example, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed described the design of planned attacks of buildings inside the U.S. and how operatives were directed to carry them out. That is valuable information for those of us who have the responsibility to protect the American people. He told us the operatives had been instructed to ensure that the explosives went off at a high -- a point that was high enough to prevent people trapped above from escaping.

He gave us information that helped uncover al Qaeda cells' efforts to obtain biological weapons.

We've also learned information from the CIA program that has helped stop other plots, including attacks on the U.S. Marine base in East Africa, or American consulate in Pakistan, or Britain's Heathrow Airport. This program has been one of the most vital tools in our efforts to protect this country. It's been invaluable to our country, and it's invaluable to our allies.

Were it not for this program, our intelligence community believes that al Qaeda and its allies would have succeeded in launching another attack against the American homeland. Making us -- giving us information about terrorist plans we couldn't get anywhere else, this program has saved innocent lives. In other words, it's vital. That's why I asked Congress to pass legislation so that our professionals can go forward, doing the duty we expect them to do. Unfortunately, the recent Supreme Court decision put the future of this program in question. That's another reason I went to Congress. We need this legislation to save it.

I am asking Congress to pass a clear law with clear guidelines based on the Detainee Treatment Act that was strongly supported by Senator John McCain. There is a debate about the specific provisions in my bill, and we'll work with Congress to continue to try to find common ground. I have one test for this legislation, I'm going to answer one question as this legislation proceeds, and it's this: The intelligence community must be able to tell me that the bill Congress sends to my desk will allow this vital program to continue. That's what I'm going to ask.

The second bill before Congress would modernize our electronic surveillance laws and provide additional authority for the terrorist surveillance program. I authorized the National Security Agency to operate this vital program in response to the 9/11 attacks. It allows us to quickly monitor terrorist communications between someone overseas and someone in the United States, and it's helped detect and prevent attacks on our country.

The principle behind this program is clear: when an al Qaeda operative is calling into the United States or out of the country, we need to know who they're calling, why they're calling, and what they're planning. Both these bills are essential to winning the war on terror. We will work with Congress to get good bills out. We have a duty, we have a duty to work together to give our folks on the front line the tools necessary to protect America. Time is running out. Congress is set to adjourn in just a few weeks. Congress needs to act wisely and promptly so I can sign good legislation.

And now I'll be glad to answer some questions. Terry.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, former Secretary of State Colin Powell says the world is beginning to doubt the moral basis of our fight against terrorism. If a former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and former Secretary of State feels this way, don't you think that Americans and the rest of the world are beginning to wonder whether you're following a flawed strategy?

THE PRESIDENT: If there's any comparison between the compassion and decency of the American people and the terrorist tactics of extremists, it's flawed logic. I simply can't accept that. It's unacceptable to think that there's any kind of comparison between the behavior of the United States of America and the action of Islamic extremists who kill innocent women and children to achieve an objective, Terry.

My job, and the job of people here in Washington, D.C., is to protect this country. We didn't ask for this war. You might remember the 2000 campaign. I don't remember spending much time talking about what it might be like to be a Commander-in-Chief in a different kind of war. But this enemy has struck us and they want to strike us again. And we will give our folks the tools necessary to protect the country; that's our job.

It's a dangerous world. I wish it wasn't that way. I wish I could tell the American people, don't worry about it, they're not coming again. But they are coming again. And that's why I've sent this legislation up to Congress, and that's why we'll continue to work with allies in building a vast coalition, to protect not only ourselves, but them. The facts are, is that after 9/11, this enemy continued to attack and kill innocent people.

I happen to believe that they're bound by a common ideology. Matter of fact, I don't believe that, I know they are. And they want to impose that ideology throughout the broader Middle East. That's what they have said. It makes sense for the Commander-in-Chief, and all of us involved in protecting this country to listen to the words of the enemy. And I take their words seriously. And that's what's going to be necessary to protect this country, is to listen carefully to what they say and stay ahead of them as they try to attack us.

Steve.

Q Can I just follow up?

THE PRESIDENT: No, you can't. Steve. If we follow up, we're not going to get -- I want Hillman to be able to ask a question. It's his last press conference -- not yet, Hillman. (Laughter.) Soon. You and Wendell seem --

Q Thank you very much, sir. What do you say to the argument that your proposal is basically seeking support for torture, coerced evidence and secret hearings? And Senator McCain says your plan will put U.S. troops at risk. What do you think about that?

THE PRESIDENT: This debate is occurring because of the Supreme Court's ruling that said that we must conduct ourselves under the Common Article III of the Geneva Convention. And that Common Article III says that there will be no outrages upon human dignity. It's very vague. What does that mean, "outrages upon human dignity"? That's a statement that is wide open to interpretation. And what I'm proposing is that there be clarity in the law so that our professionals will have no doubt that that which they are doing is legal. You know, it's -- and so the piece of legislation I sent up there provides our professionals that which is needed to go forward.

The first question that we've got to ask is, do we need the program? I believe we do need the program. And I detailed in a speech in the East Room what the program has yield -- in other words, the kind of information we get when we interrogate people, within the law. You see, sometimes you can pick up information on the battlefield; sometimes you can pick it up through letters; but sometimes you actually have to question the people who know the strategy and plans of the enemy. And in this case, we questioned people like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who we believe ordered the attacks on 9/11, or Ramzi Binalshibh, or Abu Zabda -- cold-blooded killers who were part of planning the attack that killed 3,000 people. And we need to be able to question them, because it helps yield information, the information necessary for us to be able to do our job.

Now, the Court said that you've got to live under Article III of the Geneva Convention, and the standards are so vague that our professionals won't be able to carry forward the program, because they don't want to be tried as war criminals. They don't want to break the law. These are decent, honorable citizens who are on the front line of protecting the American people, and they expect our government to give them clarity about what is right and what is wrong in the law. And that's what we have asked to do.

And we believe a good way to go is to use the amendment that we worked with John McCain on, called the Detainee Treatment Act,

as the basis for clarity for people we would ask to question the enemy. In other words, it is a way to bring U.S. law into play. It provides more clarity for our professionals. And that's what these people expect. These are decent citizens who don't want to break the law.

Now, this idea that somehow we've got to live under international treaties, you know -- and that's fine, we do, but oftentimes the United States passes law to clarify obligations under international treaty. And what I'm concerned about is if we don't do that, then it's very conceivable our professionals could be held to account based upon court decisions in other countries. And I don't believe Americans want that. I believe Americans want us to protect the country, to have clear standards for our law enforcement intelligence officers, and give them the tools necessary to protect us within the law.

It's an important debate, Steve. It really is. It's a debate that really is going to define whether or not we can protect ourselves. I will tell you this, I've spent a lot of time on this issue, as you can imagine, and I've talked to professionals, people I count on for advice -- these are people that are going to represent those on the front line of protecting this country. They're not going forward with the program. They're not going -- the professionals will not step up unless there's clarity in the law. So Congress has got a decision to make: Do you want the program to go forward or not?

I strongly recommend that this program go forward in order for us to be able to protect America.

Hillman. This is Hillman's last press conference, so -- sorry, sorry, about that.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. On another of your top priorities, immigration, leaders of both parties have indicated that any chance of comprehensive immigration reform is dead before the election. Is this an issue you would like to revisit in a lame duck session after the election? Or would it be put off until the new Congress?

THE PRESIDENT: Bob, I strongly believe that in order to protect this border, Congress has got to pass a comprehensive plan that on the one hand provides additional money to secure the border, and on the other hand recognizes that people are sneaking in here to do jobs Americans aren't doing. It would be better that they not sneak in, that they would come on a temporary basis, in an orderly way to do work Americans aren't doing and then go home. And I will continue to urge Congress to think comprehensively about this vital piece of legislation.

I went up to the Hill yesterday, and of course this topic came up. It's exactly what I told the members of Congress. They wanted to know whether or not we were implementing border security measures that they had funded last January, and the answer is, we are. One of the key things I told them was we had ended what's called "catch and release." That was a -- you know, a Border Patrol agent would find somebody, particularly from -- not from Mexico, and would say, well, we don't have enough detention space, so why don't you come back and check in with the local person you're supposed to check in with, and then they'd never show back up. And that, of course, frustrated the Border Patrol agents, it frustrates American citizens, it frustrates me, and we ended it, because Congress appropriated money that increased the number of beds available to detain people when we get them sneaking into our country illegally.

The border has become modernized. And Secretary Chertoff here, later on this month, will be announcing further modernizations, as he had led a contract that will use all kinds of different technologies to make the border more secure. But in the long run, to secure this border, we've got to have a rational work plan.

And, finally, we're going to have to treat people with dignity in this country. Ours is a nation of immigrants, and when Congress gets down to a comprehensive bill, I would just remind them, it's virtually impossible to try to find 11 million folks who have been here, working hard -- and, in some cases, raising families -- and kick them out. It's just not going to work. But granting automatic citizenship won't work either. To me, that would just provide an additional incentive for people to try to sneak in, and so therefore there is a rational way forward. I'll continue working -- I don't know the timetable. My answer is, as soon as possible, that's what I'd like to see done.

Thank you. Let's see, Wendell. Coming your way. Everybody is going to get one.

Q My apologies, Mr. President, for talking too long at the start.

THE PRESIDENT: Don't worry. I'm not going to apologize for talking too long to your answer. (Laughter.)

Q Talk as long as you'd like, sir. (Laughter.)

When you go to New York next week, it's our thinking that one of the things you'll be trying to do is to get more international support for taking a tough stance against Iran. I wonder how much that is frustrated by two things: one, the war in Iraq and world criticism of that; and the other, the Iraqi Prime Minister going to Iran and basically challenging your administration's claim that Iran is meddling in Iraqi affairs.

THE PRESIDENT: First, Wendell, my decision, along with other countries, to remove Saddam Hussein, has obviously created some concern amongst allies, but it certainly hasn't diminished the coalitions we put together to deal with radicalism. For example, there's 70 nations involved with the Proliferation Security Initiative, and that's an initiative to help prevent weapons of mass destruction and/or component parts from being delivered to countries that could use them to hurt us; or the broad war on terror, the intelligence sharing or financial -- sharing of financial information; or Afghanistan, where NATO troops are there now, along with ours.

In other words, there's a broad coalition. Most nations recognize the threat of Iran having a nuclear weapon in the middle of the Middle East. And there's common consensus that we need to work together to prevent the Iranian regime from developing that nuclear weapons program.

I am pleased that there is strong consensus. And now the objective is to continue reminding the Iranian regime that there is unanimity in the world, and that we will move forward together. And we expect them to come to the table and negotiate with the EU in good faith. And should they choose to verifiably suspend their program, their enrichment program, we'll come to the table. That's what we have said; offer still stands.

During the Hezbollah attacks on Israel, the United Nations did pass a resolution with our European friends and ourselves, and, of course, Russia and China voting for the resolution. I think it passed 14 to 1; one nation voted against the resolution toward Iran. So there is common consensus. And you've heard me lament oftentimes, it takes a while to get diplomacy working. There's one nation of Iran and a bunch of nations like us trying to kind of head in the same direction. And my concern is that they'll stall, they'll try to wait us out.

So part of my objective in New York is to remind people that stalling shouldn't be allowed. In other words, we need to move the process, and they need to understand we're firm in our commitment, and if they try to drag their feet or get us to look the other way, that we won't do that -- that we're firmly committed in our desire to send a common signal to the Iranian regime.

It is important for the Iranian people to also understand we respect them; we respect their history; we respect their traditions; we respect the right for people to worship freely, we would hope that people would be able to express themselves in the public square; and that our intention is to make the world safer. And we'll continue to do so.

Suzanne. And then Martha.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. If I could follow up on that question.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Iranian President, will actually be in the same building as you next week, in Manhattan for the United Nations General Assembly. You say that you want to give the message to the Iranian people that you respect them. Is this not an opportunity, perhaps, to show that you also respect their leader? Would you be willing to, perhaps, meet face-to-face with Ahmadinejad, and would this possibly be a breakthrough, some sort of opportunity for a breakthrough on a personal level?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I'm not going to meet with him. I have made it clear to the Iranian regime that we will sit down with the Iranians once they verifiably suspend their enrichment program. I meant what I said.

Martha.

Q Mr. President, you have said throughout the war in Iraq and building up to the war in Iraq that there was a relationship between Saddam Hussein and Zarqawi and al Qaeda. A Senate Intelligence Committee report a few weeks ago said there was no link, no relationship, and that the CIA knew this and issued a report last fall. And, yet, a month ago you were still saying there was a relationship. Why did you keep saying that? Why do you continue to say that? And do you still believe that?

THE PRESIDENT: The point I was making to Ken Herman's question was that Saddam Hussein was a state sponsor of terror, and that Mr. Zarqawi was in Iraq. He had been wounded in Afghanistan, had come to Iraq for treatment. He had ordered the killing of a U.S. citizen in Jordan. I never said there was an operational relationship. I was making the point that Saddam Hussein had been declared a state sponsor of terror for a reason, and, therefore, he was dangerous.

The broader point I was saying -- I was reminding people was why we removed Saddam Hussein from power. He was dangerous. I would hope people aren't trying to rewrite the history of Saddam Hussein -- all of a sudden, he becomes kind of a benevolent fellow. He's a dangerous man. And one of the reasons he was declared a state sponsor of terror was because that's what he was. He harbored terrorists; he paid for families of suicide bombers. Never have I said that Saddam Hussein gave orders to attack 9/11. What I did say was, after 9/11, when you see a threat, you've got to take it seriously. And I saw a threat in Saddam Hussein -- as did Congress, as did the United Nations. I firmly believe the world is better off without Saddam in power, Martha.

Dave. He's back.

Q Sorry, I've got to get disentangled --

THE PRESIDENT: Would you like me to go to somebody else here, until you -- (laughter.)

Q Sorry.

THE PRESIDENT: But take your time, please. (Laughter.)

Q I really apologize for that. Anyway --

THE PRESIDENT: I must say, having gone through those gyrations, you're looking beautiful today, Dave. (Laughter.)

Q Mr. President, critics of your proposed bill on interrogation rules say there's another important test -- these critics include John McCain, who you've mentioned several times this morning -- and that test is this: If a CIA officer, paramilitary or special operations soldier from the United States were captured in Iran or North Korea, and they were roughed up, and those governments said, well, they were interrogated in accordance with our interpretation of the Geneva Conventions, and then they were put on trial and they were convicted based on secret evidence that they were not able to see, how would you react to that, as Commander-in-Chief?

THE PRESIDENT: David, my reaction is, is that if the nations such as those you named, adopted the standards within the Detainee Detention Act, the world would be better. That's my reaction. We're trying to clarify law. We're trying to set high standards, not ambiguous standards.

And let me just repeat, Dave, we can debate this issue all we want, but the practical matter is, if our professionals don't have clear standards in the law, the program is not going to go forward. You cannot ask a young intelligence officer to violate the law. And they're not going to. They -- let me finish, please -- they will not violate the law. You can ask this question all you want, but the bottom line is -- and the American people have got to understand this -- that this program won't go forward; if there is vague standards applied, like those in Common Article III from the Geneva Convention, it's just not going to go forward. You can't ask a young professional on the front line of protecting this country to violate law.

Now, I know they said they're not going to prosecute them. Think about that: Go ahead and violate it, we won't prosecute you. These people aren't going to do that, Dave. Now, we can justify anything you want and bring up this example or that example, I'm just telling you the bottom line, and that's why this debate is important, and it's a vital debate.

Now, perhaps some in Congress don't think the program is important. That's fine. I don't know if they do or don't. I think it's vital, and I have the obligation to make sure that our professionals who I would ask to go conduct interrogations to find out what might be happening or who might be coming to this country, I got to give them the tools they need. And that is clear law.

Q But sir, this is an important point, and I think it depends --

THE PRESIDENT: The point I just made is the most important point.

Q Okay.

THE PRESIDENT: And that is the program is not going forward. David, you can give a hypothetical about North Korea, or any other country, the point is that the program is not going to go forward if our professionals do not have clarity in the law. And the best way to provide clarity in the law is to make sure the Detainee Treatment Act is the crux of the law. That's how we define Common Article III, and it sets a good standard for the countries that you just talked about.

Next man.

Q No, but wait a second, I think this is an important point --

THE PRESIDENT: I know you think it's an important point. (Laughter.)

Q Sir, with respect, if other countries interpret the Geneva Conventions as they see fit -- as they see fit -- you're saying that you'd be okay with that?

THE PRESIDENT: I am saying that I would hope that they would adopt the same standards we adopt; and that by clarifying Article III, we make it stronger, we make it clearer, we make it definite.

And I will tell you again, David, you can ask every hypothetical you want, but the American people have got to know the facts. And the bottom line is simple: If Congress passes a law that does not clarify the rules, if they do not do that, the program is not going forward.

Q This will not endanger U.S. troops, in your --

THE PRESIDENT: Next man.

Q This will not endanger U.S. troops --

THE PRESIDENT: David, next man, please. Thank you. It took you a long time to unravel, and it took you a long time to ask your question.

Q Morning, sir. I'd like to ask you another question about Iraq. It's been another bloody day there. The last several weeks have been 40, 50, 60 bodies a day. We've been talking for the last several months about Iraq being on the brink of a civil war. I'd like to ask you if it's not time to start talking about Iraq as being in a civil war, and if it's not, what's the threshold?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it seems like it's pretty easy to speculate from over here about the conditions on the ground. And so what I do is I talk to people like our Ambassador and General Casey, which I just did this morning. And they, and the Iraqi government, just don't agree with the hypothesis it is a civil war. They believe that there's, no question, violence; they believe that al Qaeda is still creating havoc; they know there's people taking reprisal; they're confident there are still Saddamists who are threatening people and carrying out attacks.

But they also believe that the Baghdad security plan is making progress. There was a lot of discussion about al-Anbar province recently, and I spent some time talking with our commanders. No question it's a dangerous place. It's a place where al Qaeda is really trying to root themselves; it's a place from which they'd like to operate. You know, this business about al Qaeda -- al-Anbar's loss is just not the case; it's not what our commanders think.

So to answer your question, there's no question it's tough. What I look for is whether or not the unity government is moving forward, whether or not they have a political plan to resolve issues such as oil and federalism, whether or not they're willing to reconcile, and whether or not Iraqi troops and Iraqi police are doing their jobs.

Q But how do you measure progress with a body count like that?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, one way you do it is you measure progress based upon the resilience of the Iraqi people; do they want there to be a unity government, or are they splitting up into factions of people warring with the head leaders, with different alternatives of governing styles and different philosophies. The unity government is intact. It's working forward. They're making tough decisions. And we'll stay with them. We'll stay with them because success in Iraq is important for this country. We're constantly changing our tactics. We're constantly adapting to the enemy. We're constantly saying, here's the way forward, we want to work with you. But this is really the big challenge of the 21st century, whether or not this country and allies are willing to stand with moderate people in order to fight off extremists. It is the challenge.

I said the other night in a speech, this is like the ideological war of the 21st century, and I believe it. And I believe that if we leave that region, if we don't help democracy prevail, then our children and grandchildren will be faced with an unbelievable chaotic and dangerous situation in the Middle East. Imagine -- imagine an enemy that can't stand what we believe in getting a hold of oil resources and taking a bunch of oil off the market in order to have an economic punishment. In other words, they say, you go ahead and do this, and if you don't, we'll punish you economically. Or imagine a Middle East with an Iran with a nuclear weapon threatening free nations and trying to promote their vision of extremism through Hezbollah.

I find it interesting that young democracies are being challenged by extremists. I also take great hope in the fact that, by far, the vast majority of people want normalcy and want peace, including in Iraq; that there is a deep desire for people to raise their children in a peaceful world; the desire for mothers to have the best for their child. And it's not -- there isn't -- you know, Americans -- you've got to understand, this is universal. And the idea of just saying, well, that's not important for us, to me, or the future of the country, it's just not acceptable.

And I know it's tough in Iraq. Of course it's tough in Iraq, because an enemy is trying to stop this new democracy, just like people are trying to stop the development of a Palestinian state, which I strongly support; or people trying to undermine the Lebanese democracy. And the reason why is because the ideologues understand that liberty will trump their dark vision of the world every time. And that's why I call it an ideological struggle. And it's a necessary struggle, and it's a vital struggle.

Richard.

Q Mr. President, as you prepare to go up to the United Nations next week to address the General Assembly, Secretary Kofi Annan has been critical of some of U.S. policies, particularly in Afghanistan lately. How would you characterize the relationship between the United States and the United Nations at this point?

THE PRESIDENT: First of all, my personal relationship with Kofi Annan is good. I like him. And we've got a good relationship, personal relationship. I think a lot of Americans are frustrated with the United Nations, to be frank with you. Take, for example, Darfur. I'm frustrated with the United Nations in regards to Darfur. I have said, and this government has said, there's genocide taking place in the Sudan. And it breaks our collective hearts to know that.

We believe that the best way to solve the problem is there be a political track, as well as a security track. And part of the security track was for there initially to be African Union forces, supported by the international community, hopefully to protect innocent lives from militia. And the AU force is there, but it's not robust enough. It needs to be bigger. It needs to be more viable.

And so the strategy was then to go to the United Nations and pass a resolution enabling the AU force to become blue-helmeted -- that means, become a United Nations peacekeeping force -- with additional support from around the world. And I suggested that there also be help from NATO nations in logistics and support, in order to make the security effective enough so that a political process could go forward to save lives.

The problem is, is that the United Nations hasn't acted. And so I can understand why those who are concerned about Darfur are frustrated; I am. I'd like to see more robust United Nations action. What you'll hear is, well, the government of Sudan must invite the United Nations in for us to act. Well, there are other alternatives, like passing a resolution saying, we're coming in with a U.N. force, in order to save lives.

I'm proud of our country's support for those who suffer. We've provided by far the vast majority of food and aid. I'm troubled by reports I hear about escalating violence. I can understand the desperation people feel for women being pulled out of these refugee centers and raped. And now is the time for the U.N. to act.

So you asked if there are levels of frustration -- there's a particular level of frustration. I also believe that the United Nations can do a better job spending the taxpayer -- our taxpayers' money. I think there needs to be better management structures in place, better accountability in the organization. I hope the United Nations still strongly stands for liberty. I hope they would support my call to end tyranny in the 21st century.

So I'm looking forward to going up there to -- it's always an interesting experience, Richard, for a West Texas fellow to speak to the United Nations. And I'm going to have a strong message, one that's -- hope, based upon hope, and my belief that the civilized world must stand with moderate reformist-minded people and help them realize their dreams. I believe that's the call of the 21st century.

Let's see, who else? The front row people have all asked. Hutch.

Q Good morning.

THE PRESIDENT: Good morning. Thank you.

Q On both the eavesdropping program and the detainee issues --

THE PRESIDENT: We call it the terrorist surveillance program, Hutch.

Q That's the one.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q You're working with Congress sort of after the fact, after you established these programs on your own authority. And federal courts have ruled in both cases, you overstepped your authority. Is your willingness to work with Congress now an acknowledgment that that is a fact?

THE PRESIDENT: First of all, I strongly believe that the district court ruling on the terrorist surveillance program was flawed. And there's a court process to determine whether or not my belief is true. That's why it's on appeal. We're working with Congress to add certainty to the program.

In terms of the Hamdan decision, I obviously believed that I could move forward with military commissions. Other Presidents had. The Supreme Court didn't agree, and they said, work with Congress. And that's why we're working with Congress.

McKinnon.

Q Thank you, sir. Polls show that many people are still more focused on domestic issues, like the economy, than on the international issues in deciding how to vote in November. And I'd just like to ask you if you could contrast what you think will happen on the economy if Republicans retain control of Congress versus what happens on the economy if Democrats take over?

THE PRESIDENT: If I weren't here -- first of all, I don't believe the Democrats are going to take over, because our record on the economy is strong. If the American people would take a step back and realize how effective our policies have been, given the circumstances, they will continue to embrace our philosophy of government. We've overcome recession, attacks, hurricanes, scandals, and the economy is growing -- 4.7 percent unemployment rate. It's been a strong economy. And I've strongly believed the reason it is because we cut taxes, and at the same time, showed fiscal responsibility here in Washington with the people's money. That's why the deficit could be cut in half by 2009, or before.

And so I shouldn't answer your hypothetical, but I will. I believe if the Democrats had the capacity to, they would raise taxes on the working people. That's what I believe. They'll call it tax on the rich, but that's not the way it works in Washington, see. For example, running up the top income tax bracket would tax small businesses. A lot of small businesses are subchapter-S corporations or limited partnerships that pay tax at the individual level. And if you raise income taxes on them, you hurt job creation. Our answer to economic growth is to make the tax cuts permanent, so there's certainty in the tax code, and people have got money to spend in their pockets.

I've always felt the economy is a determinate issue, if not the determinate issue in campaigns. We've had a little history of that in our family -- (laughter) -- you might remember. But it's a -- I certainly hope this election is based upon economic performance.

Let's see here, kind of working my way -- yes, Mark.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. I'd also like to ask an election-related question. The Republican Leader in the House this week said that Democrats -- he wonders if they are more interested in protecting the terrorists than protecting the American people. Do you

agree with him, sir? And do you think that's the right tone to set for this upcoming campaign, or do you think he owes somebody an apology?

THE PRESIDENT: I wouldn't have exactly put it that way. But I do believe there's a difference of attitude. I mean, take the Patriot Act, for example -- an interesting debate that took place, not once, but twice, and the second time around there was a lot of concern about whether or not the Patriot Act was necessary to protect the country. There's no doubt in my mind we needed to make sure the Patriot Act was renewed to tear down walls that exist so that intelligence people could serve -- could share information with criminal people. It wasn't the case, Mark, before 9/11.

In other words, if somebody had some intelligence that they thought was necessary to protect the people, they couldn't share that with somebody who's job it was to rout people out of society to prevent them from attacking. It made no sense. And so there was a healthy debate, and we finally got the Patriot Act extended after it was passed right after 9/11. To me it was an indication of just a difference of approach.

No one should ever question the patriotism of somebody who -- let me just start over. I don't question the patriotism of somebody who doesn't agree with me. I just don't. And I think it's unwise to do that. I don't think that's what leaders do. I do think that -- I think that there is a difference of opinion here in Washington about tools necessary to protect the country -- the terrorist surveillance program -- or what did you call it, Hutcheson, yes, the illegal eavesdropping program -- (laughter) -- IEP, as opposed to TSP. (Laughter.) There's just a difference of opinion about what we need to do to protect our country, Mark. I'm confident the Leader, you know, meant nothing personal. I know that he shares my concern that we pass good legislation to get something done.

Ken.

Q Thank you, sir. I'd be interested in your thoughts and remembrances about Ann Richards, and particularly what you learned in running against her 12 years ago.

THE PRESIDENT: Obviously, Laura and I pray for her family. I know this is a tough time for her children. She loved her children and they loved her a lot.

Running against Ann Richards taught me a lot. She was a really, really good candidate. She was a hard worker. She had the capacity to be humorous and, yet, make a profound point. I think she made a positive impact on the state of Texas. One thing is for certain, she empowered a lot of people to be -- to want to participate in the political process that might not have felt that they were welcome in the process.

I'll miss her. She was a -- she really kind of helped define Texas politics in its best way. And one of the things we have done is we've -- in our history we've had characters, people larger than life, people that could fill the stage; when the spotlight was on them, wouldn't shirk from the spotlight but would talk Texan and explain -- explain our state. And she was really good at that.

And so I'm sad she passed away, and I wish her family all the best, and all her friends. She had a lot of friends in Texas. A lot of people loved Ann Richards.

And as I understand, they're working on the deal and how to honor her, and she'll be lying in state in the capitol, and --

Q Will you be sending anybody to --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I will send somebody to represent me. I don't know who it is going to be yet. Well, we're trying to get the details. Before I ask somebody, I've got to find out the full details.

Thanks for asking the question. Let's see, New York Times, Sheryl.

Q Hi, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: Fine. How are you doing?

Q I'm well today, thank you. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Did you start with, hi, Mr. President?

Q Hello, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, that's fine. Either way, that's always a friendly greeting, thank you.

Q We're a friendly newspaper.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. (Laughter.) Let me just say, I'd hate to see unfriendly. (Laughter.)

Q Mr. President --

THE PRESIDENT: Want me to go on to somebody else, and you collect your -- (laughter.) Sorry, go ahead, Sheryl.

Q Mr. President, your administration had all summer to negotiate with lawmakers on the detainee legislation. How is it that you now find yourself in a situation where you have essentially an open rebellion on Capitol Hill led by some of the leading members of your own party, very respected voices in military affairs? And, secondly, would you veto the bill if it passes in the form that the Armed Services Committee approved yesterday?

THE PRESIDENT: First, we have been working throughout the summer, talking to key players about getting a bill that will enable the program to go forward, and was pleased that the House of Representatives passed a good bill with an overwhelming bipartisan majority out of their committee, the Armed Services Committee. And I felt that was good progress. And, obviously, we've got a little work to do in the Senate, and we'll continue making our case. But, no, we've been involved -- ever since the Supreme Court decision came down, Sheryl, we've been talking about both the military tribunals and this Article III of the Geneva Convention.

Article III of the Geneva Convention is hard for a lot of citizens to understand. Let's see if I can put it this way for people to understand -- there is a very vague standard that the Court said must kind of be the guide for our conduct in the war on terror and the detainee policy. It's so vague that it's impossible to ask anybody to participate in the program for fear -- for that person having the fear of breaking the law. That's the problem.

And so we worked with members of both bodies and both parties to try to help bring some definition to Common Article III. I really don't think most Americans want international courts being able to determine how we protect ourselves. And my assurance to people is that we can pass law here in the United States that helps define our treaty -- international treaty obligations. We have done that in the past. It is not the first time that we have done this. And I believe it's necessary to do it this time in order for the program to go forward.

Peter.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Sheryl's second question was whether you would veto the bill as it passed yesterday.

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, I don't -- that's like saying, can you work with a Democrat Congress, when I don't think the Democrat Congress is going to get elected. I believe we can get a good bill. And there is -- as you know, there's several steps in this process. The House will be working on a bill next week, the Senate will be. Hopefully we can reconcile differences. Hopefully we can come together and find a way forward without ruining the program.

So your question was Sheryl's question?

Q No, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, you were following up on Sheryl's question?

Q Yes, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: That's a first. (Laughter.)

Q We're a friendly paper, too. (Laughter.)

Mr. President, you've often used the phrase "stand up, stand down," to describe your policy when it comes to troop withdrawals from Iraq -- as Iraqi troops are trained and take over the fight, American troops will come home. The Pentagon now says they've trained 294,000 Iraqi troops and expect to complete their program of training 325,000 by the end of the year, but American troops aren't coming home, and there are more there now than there were previously. Is the goal post moving, sir?

THE PRESIDENT: No, no. The enemy is changing tactics, and we're adapting. That's what's happening. I asked General Casey today, have you got what you need? He said, yes, I've got what I need.

We all want the troops to come home as quickly as possible. But they'll be coming home when our commanders say the Iraqi government is capable of defending itself and sustaining itself and is governing itself. And, you know, I was hoping we would have -- be able to -- hopefully, Casey would come and say, you know, Mr. President, there's a chance to have fewer troops there. It looked like that might be the case -- until the violence started rising in Baghdad, and it spiked in June and July, as you know -- or increased in June and July.

And so they've got a plan now, they've adapted. The enemy moves; we'll help the Iraqis move. So they're building a berm around the city to make it harder for people to come in with explosive devices, for example. They're working different neighborhoods inside of Baghdad to collect guns and bring people to detention. They've got a "clear, build and hold" strategy.

The reason why there are not fewer troops there, but are more -- you're right, it's gone from 135,000 to about 147,000, I think, or 140,000 something troops is because George Casey felt

he needed them to help the Iraqis achieve their objective.

And that's the way I will continue to conduct the war. I'll listen to generals. Maybe it's not the politically expedient thing to do, is to increase troops coming into an election, but we just can't -- you can't make decisions based upon politics about how to win a war. And the fundamental question you have to ask -- and Martha knows what I'm about to say -- is: Can the President trust his commanders on the ground to tell him what is necessary? That's really one of the questions.

In other words, if you say, I'm going to rely upon their judgment, the next question is, how good is their judgment; or is my judgment good enough to figure out whether or not they know what they're doing? And I'm going to tell you I've got great confidence in General John Abizaid and General George Casey. These are extraordinary men who understand the difficulties of the task, and understand there is a delicate relationship between self-sufficiency on the Iraqis' part, and U.S. presence.

And this is not a science, but an art form in a way, to try to make sure that a unity government is able to defend itself, and at the same time not be totally reliant upon coalition forces to do the job for them. And the issue is complicated by the fact that there are still al Qaeda or Saddam remnants or militias that are still violent. And so to answer your question, the policy still holds. The "stand up, stand down" still holds, and so does the policy of me listening to our commanders to give me the judgment necessary for troop levels.

Richard, and then Allen.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Earlier this week, you told a group of journalists that you thought the idea of sending special forces to Pakistan to hunt down bin Laden was a strategy that would not work.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q Now, recently you've also --

THE PRESIDENT: Because, first of all, Pakistan is a sovereign nation.

Q Well, recently you've also described bin Laden as a sort of modern day Hitler or Mussolini. And I'm wondering why, if you can explain why you think it's a bad idea to send more resources to hunt down bin Laden, wherever he is?

THE PRESIDENT: We are, Richard. Thank you. Thanks for asking the question. They were asking me about somebody's report, well, special forces here -- Pakistan -- if he is in Pakistan, as this person thought he might be, who is asking the question -- Pakistan is a sovereign nation. In order for us to send thousands of troops into a sovereign nation, we've got to be invited by the government of Pakistan.

Secondly, the best way to find somebody who is hiding is to enhance your intelligence and to spend the resources necessary to do that; then when you find him, you bring him to justice. And there is a kind of an urban myth here in Washington about how this administration hasn't stayed focused on Osama bin Laden. Forget it. It's convenient throw-away lines when people say that. We have been on the hunt, and we'll stay on the hunt until we bring him to justice, and we're doing it in a smart fashion, Richard. We are. And I look forward to talking to President Musharraf.

Look, he doesn't like al Qaeda. They tried to kill him. And we've had a good record of bringing people to justice inside of Pakistan, because the Paks are in the lead. They know the stakes about dealing with a violent form of ideological extremists. And so we will continue on the hunt. And we've been effective about bringing to justice most of those who planned and plotted the 9/11 attacks, and we've still got a lot of pressure on them. The best way to protect the homeland is to stay on the offense and keep pressure on them.

Last question. Allen.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. It was reported earlier this week that in a meeting with conservative journalists, you said you'd seen changes in the culture, you referred to it as a Third Awakening. I wonder if you could tell us about what you meant by that, what led you to that conclusion? And do you see any contradictory evidence in the culture?

THE PRESIDENT: No, I said -- Mike, thanks. I was just speculating that the culture might be changing, and I was talking about when you're involved with making decisions of historic nature, you won't be around to see the effects of your decisions. And I said that when I work the ropelines, a lot of people come and say, Mr. President, I'm praying for you -- a lot. As a matter of fact, it seems like a lot more now than when I was working ropelines in 1994. And I asked them -- I was asking their opinion about whether or not there was a Third Awakening, I called it.

I'd just read a book on Abraham Lincoln, and his presidency was right around the time of what they called the Second Awakening, and I was curious to know whether or not these smart people felt like there was any historical parallels. I also said that I had run for office the first time to change a culture -- Herman and Hutch remember me saying, you know, the culture that said, if it feels good, do it, and, if you've got a problem, blame somebody else -- to helping to work change a culture in which each of us are responsible for the decisions we make in life. In other words, ushering in a responsibility era. And I reminded people that responsibility means if you're a father, love your child; if you're corporate America, be honest with the taxpayers; if you're a citizen of this country, love your neighbor.

And so I was wondering out loud with them. It seems like to me that something is happening in the religious life of America. But I'm not a very good focus group, either. I'm encapsulated here. But I'm able to see a lot of people, and from my perspective, people are coming to say, I'm praying for you. And it's an uplifting part of being the President; it inspires me. And I'm grateful that a fellow citizen would say a prayer for me and Laura.

Anyway, thank you all very much.

END 12:14 P.M. EDT

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