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THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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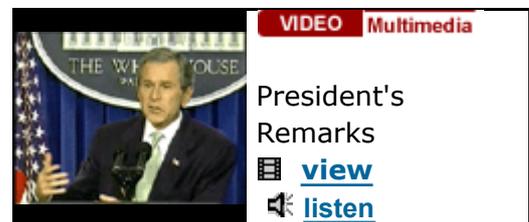
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President Bush Holds Press Conference

Press Conference by the President
The James S. Brady Briefing Room

4:00 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Good afternoon. Tomorrow the Senate Judiciary Committee will vote on the nomination of Charles Pickering to serve on the United States Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit. Judge Pickering is a respected and well-qualified nominee who was unanimously confirmed 12 years ago to the District bench. His nomination deserves a full vote, a vote in a full Senate. I strongly urge his confirmation.



While tomorrow's vote is about one man, a much larger principle is also at stake. Under our Constitution, the President has the right and responsibility to nominate qualified judges, and the Legislative Branch has the responsibility to vote on them in a fair and timely manner. This process determines the quality of justice in America, and it demands that both the President and Senate act with care and integrity, with wisdom and deep respect for the Constitution.

Unfortunately, we are seeing a disturbing pattern, where too often judicial confirmations are being turned into ideological battles that delay justice and hurt our democracy. We now face a situation in which a handful of United States senators on one committee have made it clear that they will block nominees, even highly-qualified, well-respected nominees, who do not share the senators' view of the bench, of the federal courts. They seek to undermine the nominations of candidates who agree with my philosophy that judges should interpret the law, not try to make law from the bench.



And because these senators fear the outcome of a fair vote in the full Senate, they're using tactics of delay. As a result, America is facing a vacancy crisis in the federal judiciary. Working with both Republicans and Democrats, I have nominated 92 highly-qualified, highly-respected individuals to serve as federal judges. These are men and women who will respect and follow the law. Yet the Senate has confirmed only 40 of these 92 nominees, and only 7 of the 29 nominees to the circuit courts, the courts of last resort in a vast majority of cases.

This is unacceptable. It is a bad record for the Senate. The Senate has an obligation to provide fair hearings and prompt votes to all nominees, no matter who controls the Senate or who controls the

White House. By failing to allow full Senate votes on judicial nominees, a few senators are standing in the way of justice. This is wrong, and the American people deserve better.

I will now be glad to answer a few questions, starting with Fournier.

Q Thank you, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: You are Fournier, aren't you?

Q Yes, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: I'm looking at my chart here. (Laughter.) Yes?

Q The Pentagon is calling for the development of low-yield nuclear weapons that could be used against China, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Russia, and Syria. Can you explain why the United States is considering this new policy, and how it might figure into the war on terrorism?

THE PRESIDENT: I presume you're referring to the nuclear review that was recently in the press. Well, first of all, the nuclear review is not new. It's gone on for previous administrations. Secondly, the reason we have a nuclear arsenal that I hope is modern, upgraded, and can work, is to deter any attack on America. The reason one has a nuclear arsenal is to serve as a deterrence.

Secondly, ours is an administration that's committed to reducing the amount of warheads, and we're in consultations now with the Russians on such a -- on this matter. We've both agreed to reduce our warheads down to 1,700 to 2,200. I talked with Sergey Ivanov yesterday, the Minister of Defense from Russia, on this very subject.

I think one of the interesting points that we need to develop and fully explore is how best to verify what's taking place, to make sure that there's confidence in both countries. But I'm committed to reducing the amount of nuclear weaponry and reducing the number of nuclear warheads. I think it's the right policy for America, and I know we can continue to do so and still keep a deterrence.

Q Why a policy, though, that might go after a country like Libya or Syria?

THE PRESIDENT: First of all, we've got all options on the table, because we want to make it very clear to nations that you will not threaten the United States or use weapons of mass destruction against us, or our allies or friends.

Q Do you agree with Kofi Annan that Israel must end the illegal occupation of Palestinian lands? And how is the Israeli offensive going to complicate General Zinni's mission?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, it is important to create conditions for peace in the Middle East. It's important for both sides to work hard to create the conditions of a potential settlement. Now, our government has provided a security plan that has been agreed to by both the Israelis and the Palestinians called the Tenet plan. And George Mitchell did good work providing a pathway for a political settlement, once conditions warranted.

Frankly, it's not helpful what the Israelis have recently done in order to create conditions for peace. I understand someone trying to defend themselves and to fight terror. But the recent actions aren't helpful. And so Zinni's job is to go over there and work to get conditions such that we can get into Tenet. And he's got a lot of work to do. But I didn't think he could make progress, I wouldn't have asked him to go.

During the announcement of the Zinni mission, I said there was -- we had a lot of phone conversations with people in the Middle East which led us to believe that there is a chance to create -- to get into Tenet, or at least create the conditions to get into Tenet. And I've taken that chance, and it's the right course of action at this point, Steve.

Q Mr. President, let me look at what happened Monday with the INS visa approvals for Atta and Alshehhi, and ask the requisite three-part question. Let me ask you, first of all, how high did the hair on the back of your neck rise when you heard about that? How can the American people have any faith in the credibility of the INS and its anti-terrorist efforts? And what can you do, both immediately and for the long-term, to assure nothing like that ever happens again?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it got my attention this morning when I read about that. I was stunned, and not happy. Let me put it another way -- I was plenty hot. And I made that clear to people in my administration. I don't know if the Attorney General has acted yet today or not, I haven't seen the wire story, but -- he has. He got the message. And so should the INS.

The INS needs to be reformed. And it's one of the reasons why I called for the separation of the paperwork side of the INS from the enforcement side. And, obviously, the paperwork side needs a lot of work. It's inexcusable. So we've got to reform the INS and we've got to push hard to do so. This is an interesting wake-up call for those who run the INS. We are modernizing our system, John, and it needs to be modernized, so we know who's coming in and who's going out and why they're here.

Q What does this say, sir, about the credibility of the INS and its anti-terrorism --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it says they've got a lot of work to do. It says that the information system is antiquated. And having said that, they are -- they got the message, and hopefully, they'll reform as quickly as possible. But, yes, it got my attention in a negative way.

Q Mr. President, there's a growing crisis in the Catholic Church right now, involving pedophilia. And the crisis is exploding in Boston, under the watch of Cardinal Law, who you know. Do you think the archdiocese there is acting swiftly enough to deal with the issue of pedophilia among the ranks of priests?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I know many in the hierarchy of the Catholic Church; I know them to be men of integrity and decency. They're honorable people. I was just with Cardinal Egan today. And I'm confident the Church will clean up its business and do the right thing. As to the timing, I haven't, frankly -- I'm not exactly aware of the -- how fast or how not fast they're moving. I just can tell you I trust the leadership of the Church.

Q Do you think Cardinal Law should resign?

THE PRESIDENT: That's up to the Church. I know Cardinal Law to be a man of integrity; I respect him a lot.

Q Vice President Cheney is on the road now trying to build support for possible action against Iraq. If you don't get that, down the road you decide you want to take action, would you take action against Iraq unilaterally?

THE PRESIDENT: One of the things I've said to our friends is that we will consult, that we will share our views of how to make the world more safe. In regards to Iraq, we're doing just that. Every world leader that comes to see me, I explain our concerns about a nation which is not conforming to agreements that it made in the past; a nation which has gassed her people in the past; a nation which has weapons of mass destruction and apparently is not afraid to use them.

And so one of the -- what the Vice President is doing is he's reminding people about this danger, and that we need to work in concert to confront this danger. Again, all options are on the table, and -- but one thing I will not allow is a nation such as Iraq to threaten our very future by developing weapons of mass destruction. They've agreed not to have those weapons; they ought to conform to their agreement, comply with their agreement.

Yes, John.

Q It seems to me -- you seem to be saying, yes, you would consult with the allies and others, including in the Mideast, but if you had to, you'd go ahead and take action yourself.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, you're answering the question for me. If I can remember the exact words, I'll say it exactly the way I said it before. We are going to consult. I am deeply concerned about Iraq. And so should the American people be concerned about Iraq. And so should people who love freedom be concerned about Iraq.

This is a nation run by a man who is willing to kill his own people by using chemical weapons; a man who won't let inspectors into the country; a man who's obviously got something to hide. And he is a problem, and we're going to deal with him. But the first stage is to consult with our allies and friends, and that's exactly what we're doing.

Everybody here on the front row? John?

Q Mr. President, on the question of Iraq, how does the increased violence between the Israelis and the Palestinians affect what Vice President Cheney is trying to do, and affect the case you're trying to make with our Arab allies for a regime change, or just unconditional inspections?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I understand that the unrest in the Middle East creates unrest throughout the region, more so now than ever in the past. But we're concerned about the Middle East, John, because it's affecting the lives of the Palestinians and our friends, the Israelis. I mean, it's a terrible period of time, when a lot of people are losing their lives, needlessly losing life. And terrorists are holding a potential peace process hostage.

And so while I understand the linkage, for us the policy stands on its own. The need for us to be involved in the Middle East is to help save lives. And we're going to stay involved in the Middle East, and, at the same time, continue to talk about Iraq and Iran and other nations, and continue to wage a war on terror, which is exactly what we're doing.

I want to reiterate what I said the other day. Our policy is to deny sanctuary to terrorists anywhere in the world, and we will be very active in doing that.

Q But on the question of the Palestinians, Sharon has said that he shares your concern for those not involved in terror. Do you still think that's the case?

THE PRESIDENT: I do. But, unlike our war against al Qaeda, there is a series of agreements in place that will lead to peace. And, therefore, we're going to work hard to see if we can't, as they say, get into Tenet and eventually Mitchell. I do -- I certainly hope that Prime Minister Sharon is concerned about the loss of innocent life. We certainly -- I certainly am. It breaks my heart and I know it breaks the heart of a lot of people around the world to see young children lose their life as a result of violence -- young children on both sides of this issue.

This is an issue that's consuming a lot of the time of my administration. And we have an obligation to continue to work for peace in the region and we will. We will. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Q Mr. President, in your speeches now you rarely talk or mention Osama bin Laden. Why is that? Also, can you tell the American people if you have any more information, if you know if he is dead or alive? Final part -- deep in your heart, don't you truly believe that until you find out if he is dead or alive, you won't really eliminate the threat of --

THE PRESIDENT: Deep in my heart I know the man is on the run, if he's alive at all. Who knows if he's hiding in some cave or not; we haven't heard from him in a long time. And the idea of focusing on one person is -- really indicates to me people don't understand the scope of the mission.

Terror is bigger than one person. And he's just -- he's a person who's now been marginalized. His network, his host government has been destroyed. He's the ultimate parasite who found weakness, exploited it, and met his match. He is -- as I mentioned in my speech, I do mention the fact that this is a fellow who is willing to commit youngsters to their death and he, himself, tries to hide -- if, in fact, he's hiding at all.

So I don't know where he is. You know, I just don't spend that much time on him, Kelly, to be honest with you. I'm more worried about making sure that our soldiers are well-supplied; that the strategy is clear; that the coalition is strong; that when we find enemy bunched up like we did in Shahikot Mountains, that the military has all the support it needs to go in and do the job, which they did.

And there will be other battles in Afghanistan. There's going to be other struggles like Shahikot, and I'm just as confident about the outcome of those future battles as I was about Shahikot, where our soldiers are performing brilliantly. We're tough, we're strong, they're well-equipped. We have a good strategy. We are showing the world we know how to fight a guerrilla war with conventional means.

Q But don't you believe that the threat that bin Laden posed won't truly be eliminated until he is found either dead or alive?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, as I say, we haven't heard much from him. And I wouldn't necessarily say he's at the center of any command structure. And, again, I don't know where he is. I -- I'll repeat what I said. I truly am not that concerned about him. I know he is on the run. I was concerned about him, when he had taken over a country. I was concerned about the fact that he was basically running Afghanistan and calling the shots for the Taliban.

But once we set out the policy and started executing the plan, he became -- we shoved him out more and more on the margins. He has no place to train his al Qaeda killers anymore. And if we -- excuse me for a minute -- and if we find a training camp, we'll take care of it. Either we will or our friends will. That's one of the things -- part of the new phase that's becoming apparent to the American people is that we're working closely with other governments to deny sanctuary, or training, or a place to hide, or a place to raise money.

And we've got more work to do. See, that's the thing the American people have got to understand, that we've only been at this six months. This is going to be a long struggle. I keep saying that; I don't know whether you all believe me or not. But time will show you that it's going to take a long time to achieve this objective. And I can assure you, I am not going to blink. And I'm not going to get tired. Because I know what is at stake. And history has called us to action, and I am going to seize this moment for the good of the world, for peace in the world and for freedom.

Mike Allen. I'm working my way back, slowly but surely. Michael.

Q Mr. President, a bipartisan group of lawmakers has asked Governor Ridge to testify about the administration's domestic homeland security efforts. Why has the White House said that Governor Ridge will not testify?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, he's not -- he doesn't have to testify; he's a part of my staff, and that's part of the prerogative of the Executive Branch of government. And we hold that very dear.

Q Mr. President, that's another area, along with the war and the development of the energy policy --

THE PRESIDENT: This wasn't a trick question, Mike -- get me to say that and then kind of have a quick follow-up? But go ahead.

Q No, sir. But that's an area where Congress has said members of both parties have told us they're not getting enough information from the White House.

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, Mike, Mike, we consult with Congress all the time. I've had meaningful breakfasts with the leadership in the House and the Senate. I break bread with both Republicans and Democrats right back here in the Oval Office, and have a good, honest discussion about plans, objectives, what's taking place, what's not taking place. We have members of our Cabinet briefing. Condoleezza Rice is in touch with the members of the Congress. We are in touch with -- we understand the role of the Congress. We must justify budgets to Congress. And so I don't buy that, to be frank with you.

Q Mr. President, given --

THE PRESIDENT: Mike, this is the third. Two follow-ups is a record. Keep trying.

Q Given that you've not convinced everyone in your own party of that, to what degree are you trying to recalibrate the power between Congress and the presidency?

THE PRESIDENT: Mike, I'm just doing my job. We'll let all the kind of legal historians figure all that out, you know.

First of all, I'm not going to let Congress erode the power of the Executive Branch. I have a duty to protect the Executive Branch from legislative encroachment. I mean, for example, when the GAO demands documents from us, we're not going to give them to them. These were privileged conversations. These were conversations when people come into our offices and brief us. Can you imagine having to give up every single transcript of what is -- advised me or the Vice President? Our advice wouldn't be good and honest and open.

And so I viewed that as an encroachment on the power of the Executive Branch. I have an obligation to make sure that the presidency remains robust and the Legislative Branch doesn't end up running the Executive Branch. On the other hand, there's plenty of consultation, Mike. I don't know what single Republican you're referring to. But if you'd give me the name afterwards, I'll be glad to have him over for another consultation, if you know what I mean. (Laughter.)

Q Mr. President, when you endorsed the Saudi plan on the Middle East, or the Saudi vision, it called, of course, for full normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab states. You've seen some backing away from that now by some other Arab countries and, in fact, by the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia. Can you imagine endorsing a plan that calls for anything other than full normalization, anything less than full normalization?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think the thing -- in order for there to be a plan that is acceptable to all parties, it must recognize the right of Israel to exist. And that's what I thought was very encouraging from the Saudi declaration. It was the first such declaration, if I'm not mistaken -- David, you probably know that better than me -- but that the Crown Prince said there ought to be an independent state, but that recognizes Israel. That's how I interpreted it -- Israel's right to exist. And I think that's

a very important declaration. That's why we seized on that. I have said the same thing myself, but it obviously didn't have nearly the same weight as the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia in saying that.

Q Normalization means something a little deeper than that.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, but, first of all, there's nothing more deep than recognizing Israel's right to exist. That's the most deep thought of all. After all, there are some skeptics who think that nations in that part of the world don't want Israel to exist. The first and most important qualification, it seems like to me, for there to be peace is for people in the region to recognize Israel's right to exist. And, therefore, policies ought to follow along those lines. I can't think of anything more deep than that right, that ultimate and final security.

And when the Crown Prince indicated that was on his mind, we embraced that, strongly embraced that.

Go ahead --

Q I was about to say, just a moment ago, you said that many of your allies are joining you in the war on terrorism. You do have a number of countries right now that seem to be right in the middle -- Indonesia, Somalia -- places that you've been worried about, but that have not asked for our training, our help. Would you consider going into a country that did not seek your aid?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, that's one of those pretty cleverly worded hypotheticals. Let me put it to you this way, David: We will take actions necessary to protect American people. And I'm going to leave it at that. That's a good question, however.

Yes?

Q Mr. President, back to nuclear issues, the Russian Defense Minister expressed the hope today that agreements on the New Strategic Framework could be signed by the time of your visit next May in Moscow. Is it realistic? And second, are you ready to sign documents in a treaty form? And third, have you made progress on the issue of destroying versus storing nuclear warheads?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I share the Minister's optimism that we can get something done by May. I'd like to sign a document in Russia when I'm there, I think it would be a good thing. And, therefore, we've got to make sure that those who are interested in making sure that the Cold War relationship continues on are kind of pushed in the background. In other words, we've got to work hard to establish a new relationship.

I also agree with President Putin that there needs to be a document that outlives both of us. What form that comes in, we will discuss. There is a -- I think David asked me this question, as a matter of fact, back in Slovenia, if I'm not mistaken, about storage versus destruction. We'd be glad to talk to the Russians about that. I think the most important thing, though, is verification, is to make sure whatever decision is made, that there is open verification so as to develop a level of trust.

There is a constraint, as well. I mean, the destruction of nuclear warheads requires a lot of work and a lot of detailed work, and that, in itself, is going to take time, and that's got to be a part of the equation, as well.

But those are all issues we're discussing. I had a good -- very good discussion with Sergey Ivanov yesterday. I'm confident that President Putin is interested in making a deal, coming up with a good arrangement that will codify a new relationship. The more Russia -- the more we work with Russia, the better the world will be. And we've got a good, close relationship with them. We've got a few sticking points. We've got an issue on chickens, for example, that some of you have followed. We

made it pretty darned clear to them that I think we've got to get this chicken issue resolved and get those chickens moving from the United States into the Russian market. We laugh, but nevertheless it is a problem -- that we must honor agreements. But I believe we're going to have great relations with Russia and we're going to work hard to achieve them.

Q Mr. President, can I ask about the debt limit, sir? And, specifically, about the Treasury Secretary's plan to borrow cash from the federal retirement funds. Can you justify that to the American people, sir?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm not going to comment on the Secretary of Treasury's plan. I'll tell you what I think ought to happen. I think Congress ought to pass a clean bill that raises the debt ceiling, and I'll sign it. I think it's important. I hope we can get that kind of spirit out of Congress. If they do that, it will solve the problem. We don't need to be playing politics with the debt ceiling, particularly now that we're at war.

And we're working with the Congress on that. I've had pretty good discussions with the leadership about the need to get a clean bill coming. And I hope they do. I hope they listen, I hope they respond.

Q There are those who will say that borrowing from the federal retirement funds is also a form of playing politics --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, if the Congress passes the bill, we're fine. And we've got to get that done. It's their responsibility to get the debt ceiling raised. I hope they do it quickly and soon. And we're going to work with them to get it done.

Q Mr. President, what do you make of the dust-up over the nuclear review? And have you made any decisions about its recommendations? In particular, what is your view about building smaller nuclear weapons, which some people believe would make them more likely to be used?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, I view our nuclear arsenal as a deterrent, as a way to say to people that would harm America, don't do it. That's a deterrent, that there's a consequence. And the President must have all options available to make that deterrent have meaning. That's how I view the review.

Q But what is your thinking, sir, on smaller nuclear weapons, which some analysts believe would be a major departure and would make them more likely --

THE PRESIDENT: My interest is -- Jim, my interest is to reduce the threat of a nuclear war, is to reduce the number of nuclear warheads. I think we've got plenty of warheads to keep the peace. I'm interested in -- and that's what I told President Putin and told the country. If need be, we'll just reduce unilaterally to a level commiserate with keeping a deterrence and keeping the peace.

So I'm interested in having all -- having an arsenal at my disposal, or at the military's disposal, that will keep the peace. We're a peaceful nation and moving along just right and just kind of having a time, and all of a sudden, we get attacked and now we're at war, but we're at war to keep the peace.

And it's very important for people in America to understand that at least my attitude on this is that we're not out to seek revenge. Sure, we're after justice. But I also view this as a really good opportunity to create a lasting peace.

And so, therefore, the more firm we are and the more determined we are to take care of al Qaeda and deal with terrorism in all its forms, particularly that of global reach, that we have a very good chance of solving some difficult problems -- including the Middle East, or the subcontinent. But it's going to require a resolve and firmness from the United States of America.

One of the things I've learned in my discussions, and at least listening to the echo chamber out there in the world, is that if the United States were to waver, some in the world would take a nap when it comes to the war on terror. And we're just not going to let them do that. And that's why you hear me spend a lot of time talking to the American people -- at least, I hope I'm talking to them, through you -- about why this is going to take a long period of time, and why I'm so determined to remain firm in my resolve. And -- anyway.

Q Mr. President, could I --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, sir? You asked the softest. (Laughter.)

Q I'd like to ask you about the public service component of your initiative as it --

THE PRESIDENT: The what, now?

Q The public service initiative of yours as it relates to the war, which you've just said again, that could go on for quite a while. As we all know, 18-year-old men in this country, when they turn 18, they're required to register with the draft, which is now dormant, but could be activated again. At this time, and we're looking at sort of an unlimited situation with this war, should the country expect the same of women in this country?

THE PRESIDENT: You mean in terms of the draft? Well, the country shouldn't expect there to be a draft. I know they're registering. But the volunteer army is working. Particularly when Congress passes my budget, it's going to make it more likely to work. There's been a pay raise and then we'll have another pay raise. And the mission is clear, the training is good, the equipment is going to be robust. Congress needs to pass this budget.

So I don't worry about, and people shouldn't worry about a draft. We do have women in the military and I'm proud of their service. And they're welcome in the military; they make a great addition in the military.

Q You don't think --

THE PRESIDENT: Pardon me?

Q -- that the military will be stretched too thinly, as some people have feared?

THE PRESIDENT: Ed, I don't think so. I think we're in pretty good shape right now. It's -- there's no question we have obligations around the world, which we will keep. If you went to -- did you go to Korea with us?

Q Yes, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: There's a major obligation there of 37,000 troops, an obligation that is an important obligation, one that I know is important and we will keep that obligation. But we've got ample manpower to meet our needs.

Plus we've got a vast coalition of nations willing to lend their own manpower to the war. And as I mentioned the other day in my speech there on the South Lawn, 17 nations are involved in this first theater in Afghanistan. And we had Canadians and Danish and Germans and Australians -- I'm probably going to leave somebody out -- Brits, Special Forces troops on the ground, boots on the ground, as they say, willing to risk their lives in a dangerous phase of this war. And men going cave to cave, looking for killers. These people don't like to surrender, they don't surrender. But we've been able to count on foreign troops to help us.

And so, Ed, I think we're in good shape, I really do. And, if not, we'll -- I'll address the nation. But I don't see any need to right now.

Q Will you take one on Mexico?

THE PRESIDENT: Si.

Q You are going to my country next week.

THE PRESIDENT: Es la verdad.

Q Besides what President Fox presented to you last year, you haven't acted in favor of the Mexican proposal by the President of Mexico. You haven't presented anything to Congress.

THE PRESIDENT: Excuse me a second, what proposal are you talking about?

Q The one the President Fox mentioned --

THE PRESIDENT: In specific. I don't mean to interrupt you.

Q The regularization of --

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, the immigration issue?

Q Yes, the immigration issue. So when are you going to present any concrete steps in that direction for Mexico?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, we are working closely with Mexico. We've had many of our administration officials down there. Tom Ridge just came back; he had a very good dialogue with President Fox. John Ashcroft has been very much involved with the Mexican government. We have had wide-ranging discussions as to how to make the border work better, how to make the border more secure for both countries. We've had a really good dialogue.

Some of what needs to be done didn't require law. I'm glad you brought that up. We just got 245(I) passed in the House of Representatives. Hopefully, that will come out of the Senate quickly. That's a step toward -- that's a good reform, is one that I support. I also cautioned President Fox at the time that there will be no blanket amnesty in America. I don't think the will of the American people are for blanket amnesty. I think he understands that.

And so, therefore, the thing we've got to do is figure out how to make sure willing employers are able to match up with willing employees. And so we'll work -- we're making progress; 245(I) is good progress.

Q Mr. President, do you believe there is an American pilot from the Gulf War still alive in Iraq? And if so, how might that complicate any actions you consider --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, let me just say this to you. I know that the man has got an MIA status. And it reminds me once again about the nature of Saddam Hussein, if, in fact, he's alive. And, therefore, it's just another part of my thinking about him, my, I guess, lack of respect is a good way to define it.

Q Does it complicate any action you might take, you might consider taking against Iraq in the war on terror?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, that's where we're -- this is the old hypothetical again. And let me just put

it this way: It doesn't change my opinion about him. Matter of fact, it reinforces the fact that anybody who would be so cold and heartless as to hold an American flyer for all this period of time without notification to his family just -- I wouldn't put it past him, given the fact that he gassed his own people.

Q Mr. President --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, ma'am?

Q Okay, thank you. Do you officially recognize the Zimbabwe elections? And what are your thoughts about Mugabe? And also on Pickering, what are your thoughts --

THE PRESIDENT: Wait, whoa, whoa. (Laughter.) Wait a minute. This is all over the lot. (Laughter.) Wait a minute; all over the lot.

Q Mr. President, when I get a chance with you, I have to take it.

THE PRESIDENT: You talk about somebody taking the liberty of a --

Q When I get a chance with you, I have to take it.

THE PRESIDENT: I can see that. (Laughter.) Go ahead, take it.

Q Okay.

THE PRESIDENT: Is this a six-part question?

Q No, it's only three.

THE PRESIDENT: Three, okay. (Laughter.) Let me start writing them down. First one is Zimbabwe -- go ahead.

Q Yes, and with Pickering --

THE PRESIDENT: Pickering --

Q -- what are your thoughts about many of your nominees who are opposed have issues with racial bias, including Pickering?

THE PRESIDENT: Yeah, okay. That's two.

Q Okay.

THE PRESIDENT: You're going to limit it to two? Thank you very much.

Q Yes, you're welcome.

THE PRESIDENT: That's a good break.

First on Pickering -- Pickering has got a very strong record on civil rights. Just ask the people he lives with. I had the honor of meeting the Attorney General of Mississippi, Moore, Attorney General Moore. Fine Democrat, elected statewide in the state of Mississippi. A man who, I suspect, is a man who got elected because he cares deeply about the civil rights of his citizens, came up and sat in the Oval Office and said, Judge Pickering has had a fine record on civil rights and should be confirmed by the U.S. Senate. I hope the senators hear that. I hope they listen to Moore. Or Al Gore's brother-

in-law, or the former governor of Mississippi, Winters.

Zimbabwe. We do not recognize the outcome of the election because we think it's flawed. And we are dealing with -- and we are dealing with our friends to figure out how to deal with this flawed election.

Q What are the options then?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we're dealing with our friends right now to figure out how to deal with it.

Q The House is voting on class action reform this evening. Given the current political atmosphere, do you want to enact new legal reforms into law this year? And, if so, which ones are you going to --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, here's the thing. I am for reducing the number of lawsuits in our society. I think everybody will have their day in court, but I think a society that is so kind of litigious-oriented is one that is bad for jobs, bad for the creation of jobs. And if any reform -- I will support reforms which reduce lawsuits and at the same time provide -- give people the opportunity to take their case to court.

Q Are there any ones you want to pursue?

THE PRESIDENT: Stretch. Super Stretch, Little Stretch. Regular Stretch. (Laughter.)

Q Last week, sir, you announced an ambitious set of changes to make it easier for the government to crack down on corporate wrongdoing. Yet Republicans in Congress and your own SEC Chairman says, essentially, a lot more money than you proposed will be needed to do the job effectively. I'm talking about the --

THE PRESIDENT: You're talking about when I called on the SEC to enact laws to make sure that corporate CEOs take responsibility for their books, make sure that when somebody says they've got X amount in liabilities, that X equals X and not X equals Y, or something less than X. Yes, I strongly believe that, and the SEC needs to get after it. And I don't use the excuse of not enough money in the budget, frankly. I need to know the numbers. But we need action. And we need reasonable action, without causing a plethora of lawsuits.

Q I wanted to ask about the second phase of the war. As a member of the Vietnam generation, do you worry as you send these military advisors all over the world, typically to chaotic places, that they may get involved in direct conflict and the situation could escalate? And are you prepared to do that?

THE PRESIDENT: Interesting question. Hutch, let me tell you something, I believe this war is more akin to World War II than it is to Vietnam. This is a war in which we fight for the liberties and freedom of our country.

Secondly, I understand there's going to be loss of life and that people are going to -- and the reason I bring that up is because for a while, at least for a period it seemed to be that the definition of success in war was nobody lost their life. Nobody grieves harder than I do when we lose a life. I feel responsible for sending the troops into harm's way. It breaks my heart when I see a mom sitting on the front row of a speech and she's weeping, openly weeping for the loss of her son. It's -- it just -- I'm not very good about concealing my emotions. But I strongly believe we're doing the right thing.

And, Hutch, the idea of denying sanctuary is vital to protect America. And we're going to be, obviously, judicious and wise about how we deploy troops. I learned some good lessons from Vietnam. First, there must be a clear mission. Secondly, the politics ought to stay out of fighting a war. There was too much politics during the Vietnam War. There was too much concern in the White House about political standing. And I've got great confidence in General Tommy Franks, and great confidence

in how this war is being conducted. And I rely on Tommy, just like the Secretary of Defense relies upon Tommy and his judgment -- whether or not we ought to deploy and how we ought to deploy.

Tommy knows the lessons of Vietnam just as well as I do. Both of us -- he was a, he graduated from high school in '63, and you and I graduated in '64. We're of the same vintage. We paid attention to what was going on. And so -- I think it was '64, wasn't it?

Q No, sir.

THE PRESIDENT: Oh. (Laughter.) You're not that old. You're not that old.

I'll give you an interesting fact -- I don't know if you all know this or not, speaking about Tommy. But Tommy Franks went to Midland Lee High School, class of '63. Laura Bush went to Midland Lee High School, class of '64. That's an interesting thing for the social columns. (Laughter.) For those of you who allow for your news-gathering to slip into social items. (Laughter.) Or social gossip, which sometimes happens -- it doesn't happen that much.

Q Did they know each other?

THE PRESIDENT: No. (Laughter.)

Elizabeth?

Q Mr. President, who do you hold responsible for the failure of the INS this week? I see the Attorney General said he was going to hold individuals responsible --

THE PRESIDENT: Going to do -- hold --

Q Hold individuals responsible.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, let's see what the Inspector General comes back with. But obviously, I named a good man to run it, Zigler, and he's held accountable. His responsibility is to reform the INS; let's give him time to do so. He hasn't been there that long. But he now has got another wake-up call. The first wake-up call was from me; this agency needs to be reformed. And secondly, he got another one with this embarrassing disclosure today that, as I mentioned, got the President's attention this morning. I could barely get my coffee down when I opened up my local newspaper. Well, a newspaper. (Laughter.)

Q Mr. President, back on the Middle East, sir, can you tell us what was behind the timing of pursuing a U.N. resolution at this point regarding a future Palestinian state?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, there was a -- sometimes these resolutions just get a life of their own. And sometimes we have to veto them, and sometimes we can help -- help the message. This time, we felt like we were able to make the message a clear message that we agreed with. If it was a message that tried to isolate or condemn our friend, I'd have vetoed it. In this case, it was a universal message that could lead to a more peaceful -- a peaceful world. And so we supported it. As a matter of fact, we helped engineer it; we were a part of the process.

And, as to the timing, I don't know the timing. All I know is the things start showing up on my desk. And --

Q When did it start showing up on your radar screen, sir?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, desk or radar screen, same thing. About 24 hours ago. And I heard from the

Secretary of State and Condoleezza Rice that there was a little movement afoot there at the Security Council. And so we made a decision, a conscious decision to try to send a statement that it was a hopeful statement. It turned out to be a good statement, by the way. It was one of those statements that was embraced by all the parties except for one that couldn't bring themselves to vote for it, Syria.

But, again, we are working hard to create the conditions for a security arrangement that will then enable the Mitchell process to kick in. I know you all are tired of hearing me say that. But unlike other parts of the world, in this part of the world, Tenet and Mitchell have been agreed to by both parties, which means there is a hopeful process if we can get people into the process. And so our mission is to do that. And that's why Zinni is over there.

Listen, I want to thank you very much. I've enjoyed this press conference. I hope you have, as well. Thank you.

END 4:46 P.M. EST