

President Bush Attends Veterans of Foreign Wars National Convention, Discusses War on Terror

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all. Please be seated. It's good to be with you again. I understand you haven't had much of a problem attracting speakers. (Laughter.) I thank you for inviting me. I can understand why people want to come here. See, it's an honor to stand with the men and women of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. (Applause.) The VFW is one of this nation's finest organizations. You belong to an elite group of Americans. (Applause.) You belong to a group of people who have defended America overseas. You have fought in places from Normandy to Iwo Jima, to Pusan, to Khe Sahn, to Kuwait, to Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. You brought security to the American people; you brought hope to millions across the world.

As members of this proud organization, you are advocates for the rights of our military veterans, a model of community service, and a strong and important voice for a strong national defense. I thank you for your service. I thank you for what you've done for the United States of America. (Applause.)

I stand before you as a wartime President. I wish I didn't have to say that, but an enemy that attacked us on September the 11th, 2001, declared war on the United States of America. And war is what we're engaged in. The struggle has been called a clash of civilizations. In truth, it's a struggle for civilization. We fight for a free way of life against a new barbarism -- an ideology whose followers have killed thousands on American soil, and seek to kill again on even a greater scale.

We fight for the possibility that decent men and women across the broader Middle East can realize their destiny -- and raise up societies based on freedom and justice and personal dignity. And as long as I'm Commander-in-Chief we will fight to win. (Applause.) I'm confident that we will prevail. I'm confident we'll prevail because we have the greatest force for human liberation the world has ever known -- the men and women of the United States Armed Forces. (Applause.)

For those of you who wear the uniform, nothing makes me more proud to say that I am your Commander-in-Chief. Thank you for volunteering in the service of the United States of America. (Applause.)

Now, I know some people doubt the universal appeal of liberty, or worry that the Middle East isn't ready for it. Others believe that America's presence is destabilizing, and that if the United States would just leave a place like Iraq those who kill our troops or target civilians would no longer threaten us. Today I'm going to address these arguments. I'm going to describe why helping the young democracies of the Middle East stand up to violent Islamic extremists is the only realistic path to a safer world for the American people. I'm going to try

to provide some historical perspective to show there is a precedent for the hard and necessary work we're doing, and why I have such confidence in the fact we'll be successful.

Before I do so I want to thank the national Commander-in-Chief of the VFW and his wife, Nancy. It's been a joy to work with Gary and the staff. Gary said, we don't necessarily agree a hundred percent of the time. I remember the old lieutenant governor of Texas -- a Democrat, and I was a Republican governor. He said, "Governor, if we agreed 100 percent of the time, one of us wouldn't be necessary." (Laughter.)

But here's what we do agree on: We agree our veterans deserve the full support of the United States government. (Applause.) That's why in this budget I submitted there's \$87 billion for the veterans; it's the highest level of support ever for the veterans in American history. (Applause.) We agree that health care for our veterans is a top priority, and that's why we've increased health care spending for our veterans by 83 percent since I was sworn in as your President. (Applause.) We agree that a troop coming out of Iraq or Afghanistan deserves the best health care not only as an active duty citizen, but as a military guy, but also as a veteran -- and you're going to get the best health care we can possibly provide. (Applause.) We agree our homeless vets ought to have shelter, and that's what we're providing.

In other words, we agree the veterans deserve the full support of our government and that's what you're going to get as George W. Bush as your President. (Applause.)

I want to thank Bob Wallace, the Executive Director. He spends a lot of time in the Oval Office -- I'm always checking the silverware drawer. (Laughter.) He's going to be bringing in George Lisicki here soon. He's going to be the national commander-in-chief for my next year in office. And I'm looking forward to working with George, and I'm looking forward to working with Wallace, and I'm looking forward to hearing from you. They're going to find an open-minded President, dedicated to doing what's right. (Applause.)

I appreciate Linda Meader, the National President of the Ladies Auxiliary. She brought old Dave with her. (Applause.) Virginia Carman, the incoming President. I want to thank Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Gordon Mansfield for joining us today. I appreciate the United States Senator from the state of Missouri, strong supporter of the military and strong supporter of the veterans, Kit Bond. (Applause.) Two members of the Congress have kindly showed up today -- I'm proud they're both here: Congressman Emanuel Cleaver -- no finer man, no more decent a fellow than Emanuel Cleaver -- is with us. And a great Congressman from right around the corner here, Congressman Sam Graves. Thank you all for coming. (Applause.)

Lieutenant General Jack Stultz, Commanding General, U.S. Army Reserve Command, is with us today. General, thanks for coming. Lieutenant General Bill Caldwell, Commanding General, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, is with us today, as well. General Caldwell, thank you for your service. (Applause.)

Thank you all for letting me come by. I want to open today's speech with a story that begins on a sunny morning, when thousands of Americans were murdered in a surprise attack -- and our nation was propelled into a conflict that would take us to every corner of the globe.

The enemy who attacked us despises freedom, and harbors resentment at the slights he believes America and Western nations have inflicted on his people. He fights to establish his rule over an entire region. And over time, he turns to a strategy of suicide attacks destined to create so much carnage that the American people will tire of the violence and give up the fight.

If this story sounds familiar, it is -- except for one thing. The enemy I have just described is not al Qaeda, and the attack is not 9/11, and the empire is not the radical caliphate envisioned by Osama bin Laden. Instead, what I've described is the war machine of Imperial Japan in the 1940s, its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, and its attempt to impose its empire throughout East Asia.

Ultimately, the United States prevailed in World War II, and we have fought two more land wars in Asia. And many in this hall were veterans of those campaigns. Yet even the most optimistic among you probably would not have foreseen that the Japanese would transform themselves into one of America's strongest and most steadfast allies, or that the South Koreans would recover from enemy invasion to raise up one of the world's most powerful economies, or that Asia would pull itself out of poverty and hopelessness as it embraced markets and freedom.

The lesson from Asia's development is that the heart's desire for liberty will not be denied. Once people even get a small taste of liberty, they're not going to rest until they're free. Today's dynamic and hopeful Asia -- a region that brings us countless benefits -- would not have been possible without America's presence and perseverance. It would not have been possible without the veterans in this hall today. And I thank you for your service. (Applause.)

There are many differences between the wars we fought in the Far East and the war on terror we're fighting today. But one important similarity is at their core they're ideological struggles. The militarists of Japan and the communists in Korea and Vietnam were driven by a merciless vision for the proper ordering of humanity. They killed Americans because we stood in the way of their attempt to force their ideology on others. Today, the names and places have changed, but the fundamental character of the struggle has not changed. Like our enemies in the past, the terrorists who wage war in Iraq and Afghanistan and other places seek to spread a political vision of their own -- a harsh plan for life that crushes freedom, tolerance, and dissent.

Like our enemies in the past, they kill Americans because we stand in their way of imposing this ideology across a vital region of the world. This enemy is dangerous; this enemy is determined; and this enemy will be defeated. (Applause.)

We're still in the early hours of the current ideological struggle, but we do know how the others ended -- and that knowledge helps guide our efforts today. The ideals and interests that led America to help the Japanese turn defeat into democracy are the same that lead us to remain engaged in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The defense strategy that refused to hand the South Koreans over to a totalitarian neighbor helped raise up a Asian Tiger that is the model for developing countries across the world, including the Middle East. The result of American sacrifice and perseverance in Asia is a freer, more prosperous and stable continent whose people want to live in peace with America, not attack America.

At the outset of World War II there were only two democracies in the Far East -- Australia and New Zealand. Today most of the nations in Asia are free, and its democracies reflect the diversity of the region. Some of these nations have constitutional monarchies, some have parliaments, and some have presidents. Some are Christian, some are Muslim, some are Hindu, and some are Buddhist. Yet for all the differences, the free nations of Asia all share one thing in common: Their governments derive their authority from the consent of the governed, and they desire to live in peace with their neighbors.

Along the way to this freer and more hopeful Asia, there were a lot of doubters. Many times in the decades that followed World War II, American policy in Asia was dismissed as hopeless and naive. And when we listen to criticism of the difficult work our generation is undertaking in the Middle East today, we can hear the echoes of the same arguments made about the Far East years ago.

In the aftermath of Japan's surrender, many thought it naive to help the Japanese transform themselves into a democracy. Then as now, the critics argued that some people were simply not fit for freedom.

Some said Japanese culture was inherently incompatible with democracy. Joseph Grew, a former United States ambassador to Japan who served as Harry Truman's Under Secretary of State, told the President flatly that -- and I quote -- "democracy in Japan would never work." He wasn't alone in that belief. A lot of Americans believed that -- and so did the Japanese -- a lot of Japanese believed the same thing: democracy simply wouldn't work.

Others critics said that Americans were imposing their ideals on the Japanese. For example, Japan's Vice Prime Minister asserted that allowing Japanese women to vote would "retard the progress of Japanese politics."

It's interesting what General MacArthur wrote in his memoirs. He wrote, "There was much criticism of my support for the enfranchisement of women. Many Americans, as well as many other so-called experts, expressed the view that Japanese women were too steeped in the tradition of subservience to their husbands to act with any degree of political independence." That's what General MacArthur observed. In the end, Japanese women were given the vote; 39 women won parliamentary seats in Japan's first free election. Today,

Japan's minister of defense is a woman, and just last month, a record number of women were elected to Japan's Upper House. Other critics argued that democracy -- (applause.)

There are other critics, believe it or not, that argue that democracy could not succeed in Japan because the national religion -- Shinto -- was too fanatical and rooted in the Emperor. Senator Richard Russell denounced the Japanese faith, and said that if we did not put the Emperor on trial, "any steps we may take to create democracy are doomed to failure." The State Department's man in Tokyo put it bluntly: "The Emperor system must disappear if Japan is ever really to be democratic."

Those who said Shinto was incompatible with democracy were mistaken, and fortunately, Americans and Japanese leaders recognized it at the time, because instead of suppressing the Shinto faith, American authorities worked with the Japanese to institute religious freedom for all faiths. Instead of abolishing the imperial throne, Americans and Japanese worked together to find a place for the Emperor in the democratic political system.

And the result of all these steps was that every Japanese citizen gained freedom of religion, and the Emperor remained on his throne and Japanese democracy grew stronger because it embraced a cherished part of Japanese culture. And today, in defiance of the critics and the doubters and the skeptics, Japan retains its religions and cultural traditions, and stands as one of the world's great free societies. (Applause.)

You know, the experts sometimes get it wrong. An interesting observation, one historian put it -- he said, "Had these erstwhile experts" -- he was talking about people criticizing the efforts to help Japan realize the blessings of a free society -- he said, "Had these erstwhile experts had their way, the very notion of inducing a democratic revolution would have died of ridicule at an early stage."

Instead, I think it's important to look at what happened. A democratic Japan has brought peace and prosperity to its people. Its foreign trade and investment have helped jump-start the economies of others in the region. The alliance between our two nations is the lynchpin for freedom and stability throughout the Pacific. And I want you to listen carefully to this final point: Japan has transformed from America's enemy in the ideological struggle of the 20th century to one of America's strongest allies in the ideological struggle of the 21st century. (Applause.)

Critics also complained when America intervened to save South Korea from communist invasion. Then as now, the critics argued that the war was futile, that we should never have sent our troops in, or they argued that America's intervention was divisive here at home.

After the North Koreans crossed the 38th Parallel in 1950, President Harry Truman came to the defense of the South -- and found himself attacked from all sides. From the left, I.F. Stone wrote a book suggesting that the South Koreans were the real aggressors and that we had entered the war on a false pretext.

From the right, Republicans vacillated. Initially, the leader of the Republican Party in the Senate endorsed Harry Truman's action, saying, "I welcome the indication of a more definite policy" -- he went on to say, "I strongly hope that having adopted it, the President may maintain it intact," then later said "it was a mistake originally to go into Korea because it meant a land war."

Throughout the war, the Republicans really never had a clear position. They never could decide whether they wanted the United States to withdraw from the war in Korea, or expand the war to the Chinese mainland. Others complained that our troops weren't getting the support from the government. One Republican senator said, the effort was just "bluff and bluster." He rejected calls to come together in a time of war, on the grounds that "we will not allow the cloak of national unity to be wrapped around horrible blunders."

Many in the press agreed. One columnist in The Washington Post said, "The fact is that the conduct of the Korean War has been shot through with errors great and small." A colleague wrote that "Korea is an open wound. It's bleeding and there's no cure for it in sight." He said that the American people could not understand "why Americans are doing about 95 percent of the fighting in Korea."

Many of these criticisms were offered as reasons for abandoning our commitments in Korea. And while it's true the Korean War had its share of challenges, the United States never broke its word.

Today, we see the result of a sacrifice of people in this room in the stark contrast of life on the Korean Peninsula. Without Americans' intervention during the war and our willingness to stick with the South Koreans after the war, millions of South Koreans would now be living under a brutal and repressive regime. The Soviets and Chinese communists would have learned the lesson that aggression pays. The world would be facing a more dangerous situation. The world would be less peaceful.

Instead, South Korea is a strong, democratic ally of the United States of America. South Korean troops are serving side-by-side with American forces in Afghanistan and in Iraq. And America can count on the free people of South Korea to be lasting partners in the ideological struggle we're facing in the beginning of the 21st century. (Applause.)

For those of you who served in Korea, thank you for your sacrifice, and thank you for your service. (Applause.)

Finally, there's Vietnam. This is a complex and painful subject for many Americans. The tragedy of Vietnam is too large to be contained in one speech. So I'm going to limit myself to one argument that has particular significance today. Then as now, people argued the real problem was America's presence and that if we would just withdraw, the killing would end.

The argument that America's presence in Indochina was dangerous had a long pedigree. In 1955, long before the United States had entered the war, Graham

Greene wrote a novel called, "The Quiet American." It was set in Saigon, and the main character was a young government agent named Alden Pyle. He was a symbol of American purpose and patriotism -- and dangerous naivete. Another character describes Alden this way: "I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused."

After America entered the Vietnam War, the Graham Greene argument gathered some steam. As a matter of fact, many argued that if we pulled out there would be no consequences for the Vietnamese people.

In 1972, one antiwar senator put it this way: "What earthly difference does it make to nomadic tribes or uneducated subsistence farmers in Vietnam or Cambodia or Laos, whether they have a military dictator, a royal prince or a socialist commissar in some distant capital that they've never seen and may never heard of?" A columnist for The New York Times wrote in a similar vein in 1975, just as Cambodia and Vietnam were falling to the communists: "It's difficult to imagine," he said, "how their lives could be anything but better with the Americans gone." A headline on that story, date Phnom Penh, summed up the argument: "Indochina without Americans: For Most a Better Life."

The world would learn just how costly these misimpressions would be. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge began a murderous rule in which hundreds of thousands of Cambodians died by starvation and torture and execution. In Vietnam, former allies of the United States and government workers and intellectuals and businessmen were sent off to prison camps, where tens of thousands perished. Hundreds of thousands more fled the country on rickety boats, many of them going to their graves in the South China Sea.

Three decades later, there is a legitimate debate about how we got into the Vietnam War and how we left. There's no debate in my mind that the veterans from Vietnam deserve the high praise of the United States of America. (Applause.) Whatever your position is on that debate, one unmistakable legacy of Vietnam is that the price of America's withdrawal was paid by millions of innocent citizens whose agonies would add to our vocabulary new terms like "boat people," "re-education camps," and "killing fields."

There was another price to our withdrawal from Vietnam, and we can hear it in the words of the enemy we face in today's struggle -- those who came to our soil and killed thousands of citizens on September the 11th, 2001. In an interview with a Pakistani newspaper after the 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden declared that "the American people had risen against their government's war in Vietnam. And they must do the same today."

His number two man, Zawahiri, has also invoked Vietnam. In a letter to al Qaeda's chief of operations in Iraq, Zawahiri pointed to "the aftermath of the collapse of the American power in Vietnam and how they ran and left their agents."

Zawahiri later returned to this theme, declaring that the Americans "know better than others that there is no hope in victory. The Vietnam specter is closing

every outlet." Here at home, some can argue our withdrawal from Vietnam carried no price to American credibility -- but the terrorists see it differently.

We must remember the words of the enemy. We must listen to what they say. Bin Laden has declared that "the war [in Iraq] is for you or us to win. If we win it, it means your disgrace and defeat forever." Iraq is one of several fronts in the war on terror -- but it's the central front -- it's the central front for the enemy that attacked us and wants to attack us again. And it's the central front for the United States and to withdraw without getting the job done would be devastating. (Applause.)

If we were to abandon the Iraqi people, the terrorists would be emboldened, and use their victory to gain new recruits. As we saw on September the 11th, a terrorist safe haven on the other side of the world can bring death and destruction to the streets of our own cities. Unlike in Vietnam, if we withdraw before the job is done, this enemy will follow us home. And that is why, for the security of the United States of America, we must defeat them overseas so we do not face them in the United States of America. (Applause.)

Recently, two men who were on the opposite sides of the debate over the Vietnam War came together to write an article. One was a member of President Nixon's foreign policy team, and the other was a fierce critic of the Nixon administration's policies. Together they wrote that the consequences of an American defeat in Iraq would be disastrous.

Here's what they said: "Defeat would produce an explosion of euphoria among all the forces of Islamist extremism, throwing the entire Middle East into even greater upheaval. The likely human and strategic costs are appalling to contemplate. Perhaps that is why so much of the current debate seeks to ignore these consequences." I believe these men are right.

In Iraq, our moral obligations and our strategic interests are one. So we pursue the extremists wherever we find them and we stand with the Iraqis at this difficult hour -- because the shadow of terror will never be lifted from our world and the American people will never be safe until the people of the Middle East know the freedom that our Creator meant for all. (Applause.)

I recognize that history cannot predict the future with absolute certainty. I understand that. But history does remind us that there are lessons applicable to our time. And we can learn something from history. In Asia, we saw freedom triumph over violent ideologies after the sacrifice of tens of thousands of American lives -- and that freedom has yielded peace for generations.

The American military graveyards across Europe attest to the terrible human cost in the fight against Nazism. They also attest to the triumph of a continent that today is whole, free, and at peace. The advance of freedom in these lands should give us confidence that the hard work we are doing in the Middle East can have the same results we've seen in Asia and elsewhere -- if we show the same perseverance and the same sense of purpose.

In a world where the terrorists are willing to act on their twisted beliefs with sickening acts of barbarism, we must put faith in the timeless truths about human nature that have made us free.

Across the Middle East, millions of ordinary citizens are tired of war, they're tired of dictatorship and corruption, they're tired of despair. They want societies where they're treated with dignity and respect, where their children have the hope for a better life. They want nations where their faiths are honored and they can worship in freedom.

And that is why millions of Iraqis and Afghans turned out to the polls -- millions turned out to the polls. And that's why their leaders have stepped forward at the risk of assassination. And that's why tens of thousands are joining the security forces of their nations. These men and women are taking great risks to build a free and peaceful Middle East -- and for the sake of our own security, we must not abandon them.

There is one group of people who understand the stakes, understand as well as any expert, anybody in America -- those are the men and women in uniform. Through nearly six years of war, they have performed magnificently. (Applause.) Day after day, hour after hour, they keep the pressure on the enemy that would do our citizens harm. They've overthrown two of the most brutal tyrannies of the world, and liberated more than 50 million citizens. (Applause.)

In Iraq, our troops are taking the fight to the extremists and radicals and murderers all throughout the country. Our troops have killed or captured an average of more than 1,500 al Qaeda terrorists and other extremists every month since January of this year. (Applause.) We're in the fight. Today our troops are carrying out a surge that is helping bring former Sunni insurgents into the fight against the extremists and radicals, into the fight against al Qaeda, into the fight against the enemy that would do us harm. They're clearing out the terrorists out of population centers, they're giving families in liberated Iraqi cities a look at a decent and hopeful life.

Our troops are seeing this progress that is being made on the ground. And as they take the initiative from the enemy, they have a question: Will their elected leaders in Washington pull the rug out from under them just as they're gaining momentum and changing the dynamic on the ground in Iraq? Here's my answer is clear: We'll support our troops, we'll support our commanders, and we will give them everything they need to succeed. (Applause.)

Despite the mistakes that have been made, despite the problems we have encountered, seeing the Iraqis through as they build their democracy is critical to keeping the American people safe from the terrorists who want to attack us. It is critical work to lay the foundation for peace that veterans have done before you all.

A free Iraq is not going to be perfect. A free Iraq will not make decisions as quickly as the country did under the dictatorship. Many are frustrated by the

pace of progress in Baghdad, and I can understand this. As I noted yesterday, the Iraqi government is distributing oil revenues across its provinces despite not having an oil revenue law on its books, that the parliament has passed about 60 pieces of legislation.

Prime Minister Maliki is a good guy, a good man with a difficult job, and I support him. And it's not up to politicians in Washington, D.C. to say whether he will remain in his position -- that is up to the Iraqi people who now live in a democracy, and not a dictatorship. (Applause.) A free Iraq is not going to transform the Middle East overnight. But a free Iraq will be a massive defeat for al Qaeda, it will be an example that provides hope for millions throughout the Middle East, it will be a friend of the United States, and it's going to be an important ally in the ideological struggle of the 21st century. (Applause.)

Prevailing in this struggle is essential to our future as a nation. And the question now that comes before us is this: Will today's generation of Americans resist the allure of retreat, and will we do in the Middle East what the veterans in this room did in Asia?

The journey is not going to be easy, as the veterans fully understand. At the outset of the war in the Pacific, there were those who argued that freedom had seen its day and that the future belonged to the hard men in Tokyo. A year and a half before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan's Foreign Minister gave a hint of things to come during an interview with a New York newspaper. He said, "In the battle between democracy and totalitarianism the latter adversary will without question win and will control the world. The era of democracy is finished, the democratic system bankrupt."

In fact, the war machines of Imperial Japan would be brought down -- brought down by good folks who only months before had been students and farmers and bank clerks and factory hands. Some are in the room today. Others here have been inspired by their fathers and grandfathers and uncles and cousins.

That generation of Americans taught the tyrants a telling lesson: There is no power like the power of freedom and no soldier as strong as a soldier who fights for a free future for his children. (Applause.) And when America's work on the battlefield was done, the victorious children of democracy would help our defeated enemies rebuild, and bring the taste of freedom to millions.

We can do the same for the Middle East. Today the violent Islamic extremists who fight us in Iraq are as certain of their cause as the Nazis, or the Imperial Japanese, or the Soviet communists were of theirs. They are destined for the same fate. (Applause.)

The greatest weapon in the arsenal of democracy is the desire for liberty written into the human heart by our Creator. So long as we remain true to our ideals, we will defeat the extremists in Iraq and Afghanistan. We will help those countries' peoples stand up functioning democracies in the heart of the broader Middle East. And when that hard work is done and the critics of today recede

from memory, the cause of freedom will be stronger, a vital region will be brighter, and the American people will be safer.

Thank you, and God bless. (Applause.)

END 10:29 A.M. CDT