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President Bush Attends National Religious Broadcasters 2008 Convention

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Nashville, Tennessee

11:00 A.M. CDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all. (Applause.) Thank you all. Please be seated. Thank you for the warm welcome. Nothing better than being introduced by a fellow Texan. (Applause.) And it's good to see some of my Texas buddies here. (Applause.) Like my friend, Evans, from Dallas. Good to see you, Tony. Thanks for letting me come by.

This is kind of a rambunctious crowd. (Laughter.) I really am pleased to be with you. For 64 years, this association has brought together some of the most memorable voices of the -- our Christian community here in America. You've preached the blessings of grace and understanding and patience. I've needed all three during my time as President. (Laughter.)

I was very young when I first learned about obedience to a higher power -- and my mother sends her best to you. (Laughter.) I am surrounded by strong women, and have been all my wife -- (laughter) -- and speaking about a strong and gracious woman, Laura sends her love and best. (Applause.)



We have something else in common; each of us has had doors opened to us by the same man. He led the way for America's religious broadcasters. He brought the Gospel to millions, and many years ago he helped me change my life. And today this good man is recovering from surgery in North Carolina -- and please join me in sending our love and prayers to Billy Graham. (Applause.) A lot of Americans love Billy Graham, and I'm one. So, Billy, we're thinking about you.

He has led countless Americans to the grace and goodness of the Almighty, and each of you performs the same mission every day. You renew the poor in spirit. You bring comfort to those in anguish. And you show millions the path to salvation and the peace of God.

I thank you for guiding the faithful. I thank you for strengthening America's families. I thank you for standing up for our values, including the right to life. (Applause.) And I appreciate your firm belief in the universality of freedom. I believe -- and I know most of you, if not all of you, believe -- that every man, woman and child on the face of the Earth has been given the great gift of liberty by an Almighty God. (Applause.) And today I want to speak about this precious gift, the importance of protecting freedom here at home, and the call to offer freedom to others who have never known it.

But before I do, I do want to thank Dr. Ron Harris, and his wife Judy -- straight out of Arlington, Texas. (Applause.) Appreciate other members of the National Religious Broadcasters Executive Committee. I thank Dr. Frank Wright, and his wife Ruth. I appreciate members of Congress who have come today -- Congressman Mike Pence of Indiana; Congressman Lincoln Davis of Tennessee; and Congresswoman Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee. Thank you all for coming. Proud to be with you.

This organization has had many important missions, but none more important than ensuring our airways -- America's airways -- stay open to those who preach the Good News. (Applause.) The very first amendment to our Constitution includes the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion.

Founders believed these unalienable rights were endowed to us by our Creator. They are vital to a healthy democracy, and we must never let anyone take those freedoms away. (Applause.)

I mention this because there's an effort afoot that would jeopardize your right to express your views on public airways. Some members of Congress want to reinstate a regulation that was repealed 20 years ago. It has the Orwellian name called the Fairness Doctrine. Supporters of this regulation say we need to mandate that any discussion of so-called controversial issues on the public airwaves includes equal time for all sides. This means that many programs wanting to stay on the air would have to meet Washington's definition of balance. Of course, for some in Washington, the only opinions that require balancing are the ones they don't like. (Laughter and applause.)



We know who these advocates of so-called balance really have in their sights: shows hosted by people like Rush Limbaugh or James Dobson, or many of you here today. By insisting on so-called balance, they want to silence those they don't agree with. The truth of the matter is, they know they cannot prevail in the public debate of ideas. They don't acknowledge that you are the balance; that you give voice -- (applause.) The country should not be afraid of the diversity of opinions. After all, we're strengthened by diversity of opinions.

If Congress truly supports the free and open exchange of ideas, then there is a way they can demonstrate that right now. Republicans have drafted legislation that would ban reinstatement of the so-called Fairness Doctrine. Unfortunately, Democratic leaders in the House of Representatives have blocked action on this bill. So in response, nearly every Republican in the House has signed onto what's called a "discharge petition," that would require Congress to hold an up or down vote on the ban. Supporters of this petition are only 24 signatures away.

I do want to thank Mike Pence, who is with us today, and Congressman Greg Walden, for pressing this effort and defending the right for people to express themselves freely. And I urge other members to join in this discharge petition. But I'll tell you this: If Congress should ever pass any legislation that stifles your right to express your views, I'm going to veto it. (Applause.)

We love freedom in America, and we're the leader of the world not because we try to limit freedom, but because we've helped to spread it. You and I know that freedom has the power to transform lives. You and I know that free societies are more peaceful and more prosperous. You and I know that if given the chance, men and women and children in every society on Earth will choose a life of freedom -- if just given a chance. Unless, of course, you don't believe freedom is a gift from the Almighty. The liberty we value is not ours alone. Freedom is not America's gift to the world; it is God's gift to all humanity. (Applause.)

It is no coincidence that the region of the world that is the least free is also the most violent and dangerous. For too long the world was content to ignore oppression -- oppressive forms of government in the Middle East, in the name of stability.

The result was that a generation of young people grew up with little hope of improving their lives, and many fell under the sway of violent extremism. The birthplace of three of the world's great religions became the home of suicide bombers. And resentments that began on the streets in the Middle East killed innocent people in trains and airplanes and office buildings around the world.

September the 11th, 2001, was such a day. We saw firsthand how the lack of freedom and opportunity in the Middle East directly affects our safety here at home. Nineteen men killed nearly 3,000 people because someone convinced them that they were acting in the name of God. Murder of the innocent to achieve political objectives is wrong and must be condemned. (Applause.)

These murderers were not instruments of a heavenly power; they were instruments of evil. (Applause.) And we have seen their kind before. It's important not to forget the lessons of history. We must remember the extermination of Jews in Nazi death camps were -- was evil. The crimes of Pol Pot were

evil. And the genocide in Rwanda was conducted because people's hearts were hardened. This kind of enemy must be confronted, and this kind of enemy must be defeated. (Applause.)

It is the calling of our time. Generations are often called into action for the defense of liberty, and this is such a time. Since 9/11, we're on the offense. My most important duty, and the most important duty of those of us who serve you in government, is to protect the innocent from attack. And so we're on the offense. My view is, is that if we press the enemy, if we bring them to justice, if we defeat them overseas, we won't have to face them here -- is the best strategy to protect America in the short term. (Applause.)

But that only works in the short term. The best way to defeat the enemy in the long term is to defeat their hateful ideology with a vision based upon hope, and that is, a society is based upon liberty. If you believe in the universality of freedom, then you'll recognize that people, if given a chance, just given a chance, will seize the moment, and marginalize the extremists and isolate the radicals.

Hopeful societies are those which will eventually provide the protection we want here in America -- and it will happen, unless America loses its vision and its nerve. It's going to happen, unless we forget the lessons of history.

I want to share one story with you. Some of you may have heard me tell you this before. But one of my best friends in the international community, someone with whom I spent a lot of time talking about how to defeat extremism and defend the peace, was the Prime Minister of Japan. And what I found most interesting was the history of my family. My father, like many of your relatives, signed up to fight the sworn enemy, the Japanese. And 60 years later, his son is at the peace table, planning and thinking about how we can confront this form of extremism in the short term and the long term. Something happened between Ensign Bush and Bush President 43. And what happened was, Japan adopted liberty as the core of its political system.

Freedom can transform societies. Freedom can transform enemies into allies. And some day, if the United States is steadfast and optimistic, people -- a President will be able to say, amazing thing happened: I sat down at the table with a leader of Muslim nations, all aiming to keep the peace, to spread freedom and keep America secure. (Applause.)

We're engaged in this struggle all across the world. And of course, the two most notable theaters in this ideological struggle are Afghanistan and Iraq. Some seem to believe that one of these battles is worth fighting and the other isn't -- in other words, there is a good war and a bad war. You know, the enemy are fighting hard in both countries to seize power and impose their brutal vision. The theaters are part of the same war, the same calling, the same struggle. And that's why it is essential we succeed.

Seven years ago Afghanistan was a haven for America's enemies. Under the protection of the Taliban, the September 11th -- 9/11 hijackers trained and plotted. We worked with -- because we worked with brave Afghans, because we upheld doctrine that said, if you harbor a terrorist you're just as guilty as the terrorist, we removed the Taliban from power; thereby freeing 25 million people from the clutches of a brutal, barbaric regime. (Applause.)

The camps used by the terrorists have been dismantled. The Taliban was removed from power. And then we took on a task that we knew would be as difficult, but as essential, for keeping our enemies from regaining power, and that is we offered to help the Afghan people replace tyranny with freedom. We did the short-term job of denying safe haven. But we did something else. We said, we want to help you live lives based upon liberty. And it was a daunting task, when you really put it in perspective. The Afghan people had little experience with democracy. It's a foreign concept. We've grown up in it here; in Afghanistan, you say democracy, they're not exactly sure what you're talking about.

Afghan people under the Taliban didn't have any constitution or any of the normal institutions of a free and stable government. Afghanistan was one of the poorest countries in the world, with few natural resources, and a population that thought it was condemned to unspeakable suffering.

In the entire nation, there were only 30 miles of paved road. Only 9 percent of the population had access to health care. Under the strict control of the Taliban, women were treated like chattel and girls could not attend school. Children lived in hatred and misery, and they were not even permitted an act as simple as flying a kite. It was a backward, brutal society.

But we had better aspirations for the people of Afghanistan. We set our sights high, because we believe in the universality of freedom. We trusted in the power of freedom to transform the country, a certain trust that has to go with basic principles in life. And we're seeing the results. Eight million Afghans went to the polls to elect a President for the first time in their history. Afghans drafted a new constitution and elected a national assembly. With the support of international partners, the Afghan economy has doubled in size. There are now more than 1,500 miles of paved roads. A majority of the population has access to health care. Women have seats in the parliament. Girls attend school again. And one small but telling sign is this: Afghan children are flying kites again. (Laughter and applause.)

A free society is emerging, and the fundamental question facing the United States of America and our friends and allies is, is it worth it and necessary? I believe it is necessary, and I strongly believe it's worth it. Afghanistan has got a lot of challenges. They got to overcome corruption, they got to fight narcotics trafficking, and they got to strengthen the government at all levels. They face a vicious and brutal enemy that is determined to regain power and deny the people of Afghanistan their freedom.

We saw the nature of this enemy when Taliban extremists invaded an Afghan school. They kidnaped six teachers; they beat the schoolchildren with sticks to scare them away from attending classes. We saw the nature of this enemy when extremists beheaded the principal of an Afghan high school and forced his wife and children to watch. We saw the nature of this enemy last summer when Taliban extremists paid an Afghan boy to push a cart carrying explosives into a crowded marketplace. And the terrorists detonated the cart, killing the boy and Afghan security officials.

This enemy sees no value in human life. And they continue their campaign of bloody and horrific attacks, all attempting to demoralize the people of Afghanistan, and all attempting to wait the coalition out. For the sake of humanity and for the sake of the safety of our people, for the sake of human life and human dignity, and for the sake of the security of the United States of America, we will stop this murderous movement now, before it finds a new path to power. (Applause.) I believe it is important for administrations to confront problems now, and not pass them on to other people. And that's the choice I have made for the sake of peace and freedom.

Our forces made progress last year in partnering with local Afghans against the enemy in eastern Afghanistan, which was an insurgent stronghold. Now the Taliban and its allies are seeking to launch new attacks against the people. In other words, these are relentless killers. Their methods and their immorality have alienated many of the people who once supported them.

It's amazing what happens when there's a contrast -- ideological contrast presented to people with clarity: Do you want to live in freedom, or do you want your little girl denied the opportunity to go to school? Afghans across the country are fighting back. More than 50,000 Afghans have stepped forward to serve the Afghan army; 76,000 have joined the police force. They've invested in this fight, and they need our help. That's what they're saying -- they want help. And we're going to give it to them. It's in our interests that we support these people.

In the year ahead, the United States will work with our allies and the Afghan people in an aggressive effort to counter the enemy. This spring the United States is increasing our military commitment to the country. We're sending a Marine expeditionary unit and an infantry battalion, totaling more than 3,200 additional Marines, to train Afghan forces and to support the offense against the Taliban in southern Afghanistan.

NATO allies and other partners are also in the fight. Many of these allies, particularly the Canadians and the Australians, the Dutch, the Danes, and the British are taking on some of the most difficult missions in dangerous areas. You may have recently heard about one young Brit who fought against the Taliban. It was Prince Harry of Wales. When he returned to England, he said this: "If you spoke to a lot of the other guys who came off the plane with me, there are plenty of people willing to go back and serve their country." And we admire that spirit, and so do the people of Afghanistan.

In a few weeks, I'm going to attend the NATO summit in Bucharest. I'm going to thank our allies for standing with the people, the brave people of this young democracy. I will remind them that we're not only in a mission to protect our own security; we're on a humanitarian mission that will free young girls to be able to realize their dreams.

I will also ask NATO to join the United States in doing even more. Now is the time for nations to make the hard decisions necessary so our children can grow up in a more peaceful world. I will call upon more international assistance to help Afghanistan on the road to freedom. We know what's at stake, and we know what we have to do -- and so we're going to help the people of Afghanistan realize the blessings of liberty.

The other front in this ideological struggle is Iraq. And just as we did in Afghanistan, we removed a lethal threat to our national security. The decision to remove Saddam Hussein was the right decision early in my presidency; it is the right decision at this point in my presidency; and it will forever be the right decision. (Applause.)

And again we took on a difficult task that we knew was essential to keeping America's enemies from gaining power. We did not take the easy path of replacing one dictator with another. Instead we offered Iraqis a chance to build a future of freedom. In that effort, our coalition faced -- also faced daunting challenges. Like Afghanistan, Iraq had little experience with true democracy. Iraqis held nationwide votes for President, but it turns out only one candidate was on the ballot. In 1995, Saddam Hussein received 99 percent of the vote. Seven years later he did a little better -- (laughter) -- he got 100 percent of the vote. (Laughter.)

As Iraqis lived through these grotesque charades, they were rounded up at random by secret police. Women were raped by Iraqi authorities. Citizens were mutilated and dumped into mass graves. And Shia and Sunni and Kurds were oppressed and pitted against one another.

Despite the divisions and challenges, I believed, as did many in my administration, that freedom has the power to transform this country; that freedom has the power to provide hope after despair. And so we reached out to the population and the Iraqi people responded. Together, Shia, Kurds and an increasing number of Sunnis joined America to advance a bold vision, and that is to build a lasting democracy in the heart of the Middle East.

Twelve million Iraqis braved threats of violence and went to the polls to elect a representative government. You might remember those days of people waving purple-ink-stained fingers. Iraqis drafted one of the most democratic constitutions in the Arab world, and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have raised their hands and risked their lives to defend their nation.

The enemy saw these advances and were determined to stop them. They mounted horrific acts of violence designed to exploit sectarian divisions and incite further killing. And in these acts we again saw the nature of the enemy. We saw the nature of the enemy when they killed a young boy and then booby-trapped his body so it would explode when his family came to retrieve him. We saw the nature of this enemy when terrorists put children in the backseat of a car so they could pass a security checkpoint, and then blew up the car with the children still inside. We saw the nature of the enemy just over a month ago when they sent two mentally retarded, troubled Iraqi women wearing suicide vests into crowded marketplaces. The vests exploded, killing the women and dozens of innocent people.

Anyone who doubts the importance of defeating this vicious enemy need only imagine what would happen if we were driven out of Iraq before the job was finished. What would happen if they seized territory from -- to be able to have safe haven? What would happen if they seized oil fields and used their wealth to attack America and our allies?

These are vicious people who know no bounds of humanity. They would not hesitate to murder. It's essential for our citizens to understand this. And that is why this war must be fought, and that is why this war -- this enemy must be defeated.

I wish I didn't have to talk about war. No President wants to be a war President. But when confronted with the realities of the world, I have made the decision that now is the time to confront, now is the

time to deal with this enemy, and now is the time to spread freedom as the great alternative to the ideology they adhere to. (Applause.)

Just over a year ago, things were not going well in Iraq. Terrorists and extremists were succeeding in their efforts to plunge Iraq into chaos. American peace and security required us to defeat this enemy, just as I said. So my administration reviewed our strategy, and changed course with victory in mind. I sent reinforcements into Iraq in a dramatic policy that's now being called "the surge."

We also changed the way our troops were used. U.S. and Iraqi forces began living together among the Iraqi people, to help drive the terrorists out. Our forces stayed around to ensure the terrorists did not return. We launched a civilian surge to help local governments deliver economic resources in the wake of the security gains. We launched a diplomatic surge, with an expanded and active role for international organizations like the United Nations and the G8. We've encouraged its neighbors to help this young society flourish and recover from the brutality of a dictator.

The Iraqi people saw these efforts; they had renewed faith in America's commitment to the fight. As you can imagine, during that period of time a lot of folks were wondering, is America going to stay with us? Do they understand our deep desire to live in freedom? Can we count on them? And when they found out they could, they launched a surge of their own. Increasing numbers of Sunni leaders have turned against the terrorists and begun to reclaim their communities. The government in Baghdad has stepped forward, as well. They've added more than 100,000 new Iraqi soldiers and police during last year. They're beginning to pass laws in Baghdad. They passed a budget -- on time. (Laughter and applause.)

Folks who were involved in the insurgency have now decided they want to be a part of their government. The Iraqi people have begun to see what freedom offers. They've seen what the enemy plans, and they have chosen to stand on the side of freedom. And America stands with them. (Applause.)

Next month, General Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker will return to Washington to report on the progress in Iraq and offer their recommendations. And I will carefully consider their recommendations. I can report this to you, though, that since the surge began, sectarian killings are down; al Qaeda has been driven from many strongholds it once held. I strongly believe the surge is working, and so do the Iraqis.

And as a return on our success -- in other words, as we get more successful, troops are able to come home. They're not coming home based upon defeat, or based upon opinion polls, or based upon focus groups, or based upon politics. They're coming home because we're successful. (Applause.) And the pace of that withdrawal has been determined, and then the commanders will take a further assessment. But I want to assure you, just like I assure military families and the troops: The politics of 2008 is not going to enter into my calculation. It is the peace of the years to come that will enter into my calculation. (Applause.)

The gains in Iraq are tenuous, they're reversible and they're fragile, and there is much more work to be done. This enemy is resilient, and they attack -- they use asymmetrical warfare. They use suicide vests. Just yesterday the enemy killed eight of our soldiers in two separate attacks. And I know you join me in offering our prayers to their loved ones, that the Good Lord will provide them strength and comfort during the ultimate test.

We mourn every loss of life. We also know that the reason why the enemy uses such brutal tactics is they're trying to shake our nerve. And frankly, that's not hard to do in America because we're a compassionate people. We value life, and we care. We really do want to reach out to others, and when we see this kind of horrific killing, it affects us, all of us. It also must send a message to us that we must be determined and steadfast. We're determined to defeat this enemy, and you just got to know, so are the people of Iraq. Millions who have suffered decades of tyranny and torment now are beginning to see hope. And for the sake of the security, and for the sake of peace, and for the sake -- a generation of kids coming up, the United States will help the Iraqis succeed. (Applause.)

And the effects of a free Iraq and a free Afghanistan will reach beyond the borders of those two countries. I believe that success of these two countries will show others the way. It will show others

what's possible. And we undertake this work because we believe that every human being bears the image of our Maker. That's why we're doing this. No one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. (Applause.)

People of all faiths and all backgrounds deserve the chance at a future of their own choosing. That's what America believes. After all, those were the ideals that helped create our nation. Those ideals were an honorable achievement of our forefathers, and now it's the urgent requirement of this generation.

The work before our country is hard and it has risks

-- it's just hard work. And yet I don't see that as a reason to avoid it. Our enemies are ruthless, but they're going to be defeated. (Applause.) They've got the capacity to blow people up through suicide -- but you notice none of the leaders ever are the suicide bombers, however. (Laughter.) But we got something more powerful: We got determination, we got will, and we got freedom at our disposal.

Evil in some form will always be with us, and we must never be afraid to face it. I know you understand that. I also know that you understand that for those who are on the front lines, and for those who struggle against evil, they could be helped through prayer. And I appreciate your prayers. I appreciate your prayers to help comfort millions of people. I appreciate the fact that you pray for our troops and their families. And I appreciate the prayers that you have directed my way. I feel your prayer. I can't tell you how meaningful they have been, to help Laura and me deal with -- do our job. And I can report to you this: that the prayers of the people have affected us, and that being the President has been a joyous experience. (Applause.)

So I thank you for what you do. I thank you for giving me a chance to come and share some of my thoughts with you. God bless you, and God bless America. (Applause.)

END 11:42 A.M. CDT
