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President Bush Presses for Peace in the Middle East

Remarks by the President in Commencement Address at the University of South Carolina
University of South Carolina
Columbia, South Carolina

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3:16 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all very much. Thank you, all. President Sorensen and Governor Sanford; members of the South Carolina congressional delegation and state officials; members of faculty, trustees, the families, distinguished guests. And members of the Class of 2003. (Applause.)

Thank you for the warm welcome to this great state and to this fine university. I'm honored to be with you on graduation day as you all become proud alumni of the University of South Carolina.

I work every day with a distinguished graduate of USC -- I brought him along this afternoon: White House Chief of Staff, Andrew Card, of the Class of 1971. (Applause.)

Andy is a superb public servant and an honorable man. His loyalty to this university runs deep and sometimes he gets carried away. (Laughter.) I don't mind the chicken finger Wednesdays at the White House. (Laughter.) I don't even mind his shag-dancing in the West Wing. (Laughter.) But it's a little much when Andy shows up on the day of the Clemson game dressed as "Cocky." (Laughter and applause.)

I am so thankful for the invitation to be the speaker this afternoon. When I arrived, I heard an old boy standing outside, he said, we're honored to have the President speaking with us today, it's almost as good as last year, when Lou Holtz was the speaker. (Laughter.)

Today marks a great achievement for this graduating class. You've put your talents to good use, you're seeing the rewards of your hard work, congratulations to each one of you. (Applause.)

I also congratulate the men and women who gave their best to this and every class, the fine professors of the University of South Carolina. (Applause.) And I join the graduates in thanking the people whose love and sacrifice made this day possible, the parents of the graduates of the Class of 2003. (Applause.)

Forty-six years ago, Senator John F. Kennedy came to this campus to address the graduating class of 1957. He spoke of the great problems of that time, including, he said, "untangling the strife-ridden, hate-ridden Middle East." In the decades since, that strife and hate sometimes seem like a distant tragedy, having little to do with America.

After September the 11th, 2001, your generation and our whole country knows better. In an age of global terror and weapons of mass destruction what happens in the Middle East greatly matters to America. The bitterness of that region can bring violence and suffering to our own cities. The advance of freedom and peace in the Middle East would drain this bitterness and increase our own security.

So today I want to discuss with you a great goal for this nation. We will use our influence and idealism to replace old hatreds with new hopes across the Middle East. (Applause.) A time of historic opportunity has arrived. A dictator in Iraq has been removed from power. (Applause.) The terrorists of that region are now seeing their fate,

the short, unhappy life of the fugitive. Reformers in the Middle East are gaining influence, and the momentum of freedom is growing. We have reached a moment of tremendous promise, and the United States will seize this moment for the sake of peace. (Applause.)

The future of peace requires the defeat of terror. So America and a large coalition of nations are waging a global and unrelenting war against the terrorists. And we are winning. (Applause.)

In the battle of Afghanistan, we destroyed one of the most oppressive regimes on earth, and we destroyed many of the terrorists it harbored. Across six continents, American, and our friends and allies have been hunting down the terrorists one by one and bringing them to justice.

And in the battle of Iraq, we faced a regime that aided terrorists, armed itself with weapons of mass destruction to threaten the peace, and persecuted its own people. And today, that regime is no more. (Applause.)

During these 20 months, the world has seen the resolve of the American people. And the world has seen the power and the skill and the bravery of American armed forces. (Applause.) Our men and women in uniform have acted with courage and decency, in the proudest traditions of this nation. And our nation is grateful. And for those of you who are going into the ROTC, you will be entering a military that will remain second to none. (Applause.)

Our nation is strong. Our greatest strength is that we serve the cause of liberty. We support the advance of freedom in the Middle East, because it is our founding principle, and because it is in our national interest. The hateful ideology of terrorism is shaped and nurtured and protected by oppressive regimes. Free nations, in contrast, encourage creativity and tolerance and enterprise. And in those free nations, the appeal of extremism withers away.

Free governments do not build weapons of mass destruction for the purpose of mass terror. Over time, the expansion of liberty throughout the world is the best guarantee of security throughout the world. Freedom is the way to peace. (Applause.)

Some believe that democracy in the Middle East is unlikely, if not impossible. They argue that the people of the Middle East have little desire for freedom or self-government. These same arguments have been heard before in other times, about other people. After World War II, many doubted that Germany and Japan, with their histories of autocratic rule and aggressive armies, could ever function as free and peaceful societies. In the Cold War we were told that imperial communism was permanent and the Iron Curtain was there to stay.

In each of these cases -- in Germany, in Japan, in Eastern Europe and in Russia -- the skeptics doubted, then history replied. Every milestone of liberty over the last 60 years was declared impossible until the very moment it happened. The history of the modern world offers a lesson for the skeptics: do not bet against the success of freedom. (Applause.)

Freedom has advanced because the desire for liberty and justice is found in every human heart. And the men and women of the Muslim world, one-fifth of all humanity, share this hope of liberty. Freedom has advanced because it is a way to lift millions out of poverty and improve their lives. Where freedom is denied, people live in isolation and stagnation. Where freedom is welcome, people in every culture can flourish. And freedom is advanced in our time because at crucial moments brave men and women have worked and sacrificed for it. And the United States has taken their side. This is how dissidents and political prisoners became the leaders of newly free countries. And this is how former enemies became loyal friends of the United States.

The Middle East presents many obstacles to the advance of freedom. And I understand that this transformation will be difficult. Recently, a group of 30 Arab scholars issued a report describing a freedom deficit in Arab countries, citing in particular a lack of human rights and poor education. They also identified the social oppression of women as a major barrier to progress. And they are correct. No society can succeed and prosper while denying basic rights and opportunities to the women of their country. (Applause.)

For all the challenges, we also see hopeful signs of change. About half of all the Muslim people live under democratic rule in nations from Turkey to Indonesia. The governments of Bahrain and Morocco have held recent and free elections. And Jordan will hold elections next month. The people of Qatar have approved a new constitution guaranteeing basic freedoms. Crown Prince Abdallah of Saudi Arabia has proposed a new Arab

charter calling for internal reform and enhanced political participation in nations of that region.

And in Iran, the desire for freedom is stirring. In the face of harsh repression, Iranians are courageously speaking out for democracy and the rule of law and human rights. And the United States strongly supports their aspirations for freedom. (Applause.)

Those who feed hatred want to create a fault line between the east and west. Yet, in the growing desire for freedom throughout the Muslim world, there is no clash of civilizations. When terrorists and tyrants resist and attack freedom, they are resisting and attacking the hopes of Muslims everywhere. When terrorists go on missions of suicide and murder, they defile the high ethical teachings of Islam, itself. Their true ambition is to dominate and control and remake whole societies in their own cruel image. Repression of the kind practiced by Saddam Hussein and the Taliban is not the wave of the future. Free people, not tyrants or murderers, will set the course of history. (Applause.)

Freedom is taking hold in Afghanistan and Iraq -- countries of more than 50 million newly liberated people, countries building for themselves the institutions of self-government. And our nation has special responsibilities to these countries, responsibilities we will keep. In Afghanistan, America and our allies are helping to build roads and train police and rebuild schools. This summer, at town hall meetings across the country, Afghans will discuss the working draft of a new constitution. And in the fall, a national assembly will convene to ratify the constitution of a free and democratic Afghanistan. (Applause.)

The Afghan people face continued struggles in rebuilding their government and the nation. But the days when women were beaten in the streets and executed on soccer fields are over. (Applause.)

In Iraq, we are restoring electricity and water and providing medicines and supplies and removing the thugs who threaten the peace and order of the country. Iraqi citizens have conducted two major conferences to discuss their country's future and place themselves on the path of self-government.

Soon, Iraqis from every ethnic group will choose members of an interim authority. The people of Iraq are building a free society from the ground up, and they are able to do so because the dictator and his regime are no more. (Applause.)

America is working with governments and reformers throughout the Middle East. We are strengthening ties through our Middle East partnership initiative. As a further step, Secretary Powell and Trade Representative Zoellick will meet with regional leaders in Jordan next month to discuss an agenda of economic and political and social progress. Progress will require increased trade, the engine of economic development.

The combined GDP of all Arab countries is smaller than that of Spain. Their peoples have less access to the Internet than the people of Sub-Saharan Africa. The Arab world has a great cultural tradition, but is largely missing out on the economic progress of our time. Across the globe, free markets and trade have helped defeat poverty, and taught men and women the habits of liberty. So I propose the establishment of a U.S. -Middle East free trade area within a decade, to bring the Middle East into an expanding circle of opportunity, to provide hope for the people who live in that region.

We will work with our partners to ensure that small and mid-sized businesses have access to capital, and support efforts in the region to develop central laws on property rights and good business practices. By replacing corruption and self-dealing, with free markets and fair laws, the people of the Middle East will grow in prosperity and freedom. (Applause.)

Making the most of economic opportunities will require broader and better education, especially among women who have faced the greatest disadvantages. We will work to improve literacy among girls and women building on similar efforts in Afghanistan, and Morocco, and Yemen. We'll provide resources for the translation of early reading books into Arabic and donate those books to primary schools in the region.

And, ultimately, both economic success and human dignity depend on the rule of law and honest administration of justice. So America will sponsor, with the government of Bahrain, a regional forum to discuss judicial reforms. And I'm pleased that Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor has agreed to lead this effort.

As trade expands and knowledge spreads to the Middle East, as women gain a place of equality and respect, as the rule of law takes hold, all peoples of that region will see a new day of justice and a new day of prosperity.

For generations, one of the most tragic problems in the Middle East has been the conflict in the Holy Land. Yet, now, with a liberated Iraq, with new leadership for the Palestinian people, with efforts of leaders like President Mubarak and Crown Prince Abdallah, the hope of peace is renewed.

If the Palestinian people take concrete steps to crack down on terror, continue on a path of peace, reform and democracy, they and all the world will see the flag of Palestine raised over a free and independent nation. (Applause.)

All sides of this conflict have duties. Israel must take tangible steps now to ease the suffering of Palestinians and to show respect for their dignity. And as progress is made toward peace, Israel must stop settlement activity in the occupied territories. Arab nations must fight terror in all forms, and recognize and state the obvious once and for all: Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state at peace with its neighbors. (Applause.)

The way forward in the Middle East is not a mystery, it is a matter of will and vision and action. The way forward depends on serving the interests of the living, instead of settling the accounts of the past.

To seize this moment, I am sending Secretary Powell to the Middle East, to call all the parties to their responsibilities. Secretary Powell leaves on this mission tonight. He carries with him my personal commitment: America will work without tiring to achieve two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in security and prosperity and in peace. (Applause.)

You are living in an historic time for our country. When America was attacked 20 months ago, many thought that an age of fear and terror had arrived. Yet, the world has seen something very different. America is fighting against grave threats wherever they may gather.

We're determined to help build a Middle East that grows in hope, instead of resentment. Because of the ideals and resolve of this nation, you and I will not live in an age of terror. We will live in an age of liberty. (Applause.)

I wish each of you well in the careers and lives that await you. I thank you for the invitation, for the honorary degree, and for the privilege of sharing this proud day with the University of South Carolina, Class of 2003. (Applause.)

May God bless you, and may God continue to bless America. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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