



CLICK HERE TO PRINT

For Immediate Release
Office of the Vice President
February 24, 2007

Vice President's Remarks with Australian Prime Minister John Howard

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Office
Sydney, Australia

10:35 A.M. (Local)

PRIME MINISTER HOWARD: Well, ladies and gentlemen, I'm delighted to welcome the Vice President of the United States to Australia. The Vice President and I have had a very lengthy discussion in which we have canvassed Iraq, Afghanistan, China, our relations with and the influence of Indonesia in our region. We've had a bit of chit chat as politicians normally do on occasions like this about world politics generally. And all of this is taking place against the background of the very close, longstanding and rock solid friendship and relationship between the people of Australia and the people of the United States.

Vice President Cheney is a very welcome visitor to this country. He knows it well. He came here frequently between his years of service with the first Bush administration and his becoming Vice President.

As well as discussing the matters I've itemized, I spoke to him regarding our concerns about the progress with the trial of David Hicks. I'll be joining the Vice President -- or rather he will be joining me and some of my senior colleagues for lunch at Kirribilli House. And we'll have the opportunity during that lunch to continue our discussions. But, Dick, you're very welcome. You're a good friend --

(Technical difficulties.)



PRIME MINISTER HOWARD: Well, did I tell you as well as talking about the matters I've mentioned, I raised our concerns about David Hicks, is that about where you dropped off? Is that about right?

Q Yes.

PRIME MINISTER HOWARD: Well, I did indicate to the Vice President our concerns about the processes and the time involved in bringing David Hicks to trial, as well as discussing that and the other matters I spoke about, the Vice President and I will, along with some of my senior colleagues, be having lunch at Kirribilli House later today. At that lunch we will talk about some trade issues I intend to raise and some broader political issues. But let me say again, Dick, you're very, very welcome in our country. You have a long and warm and close association with Australia. We value very much the determination and articulation you have brought to the cause of the West in fighting the scourge of terrorism, and the determination of your country and a determination that I feel and my country shares to resist terrorism wherever it occurs, be it in Afghanistan, in own part of the world, in Iraq, or, indeed, in any other part of the world. It is a threat of different dimensions from ones we've faced in the past, but the threat is no less lethal than ones the West has previously faced. And we must remain -- and maintain our resolve in resisting it.

For the best I can remember, that's what I said. (Laughter.)

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: It sounded better the second time. (Laughter.)

I'm delighted to be here. And I want to thank Prime Minister Howard for his gracious hospitality. We have been friends for a long time. And I've visited Australia on many occasions, but it's always a special privilege to come

back, especially to Sydney, one of my favorite cities.

I want to also bring good wishes to everybody in Australia from our President and from the people of the United States. I've made this journey to focus on dialogue between our two countries, to thank the people of Australia for the friendship that means so much to the United States. Prime Minister Howard has spoken of the age old wisdom that we must keep our friendships in good repair. And certainly, I believe our two nations have lived by that wisdom.

Australians and Americans know each other. We respect and like each other. We face common challenges with firmness and resolve. And rarely have the challenges been so numerous and yet never before has our alliance been stronger.

I had the privilege of meeting with members of the Australian Defence Force who've demonstrated a great professionalism and courage in Afghanistan and Iraq. Australia, of course, has been a staunch ally in the global war on terror, and the conduct of the Australian Defence Forces reflects great credit on the nation.

America is proud to count Australia as a skilled and a decisive ally. We have much yet to do in Afghanistan and Iraq to defeat freedom's enemies and to consolidate the gains for democracy. But we will honor our commitments, and we'll remain on the offensive against the forces of extremism and violence.

The U.S. and Australia face the world with open eyes, and we accept the responsibilities of leadership. Our transpacific alliance will continue to work to build security and stability throughout Southeast Asia, addressing the dangers of weapons proliferation, extending the benefits of free markets, and open trade, and confronting environmental challenges, as well.

Australia's contribution to security and to good governance in the Pacific Island countries is principled. It's effective, and it's indispensable. History has set a good deal of work in front of us, and none of it is easy. Yet together we compose one of the world's great alliances, a broad and successful partnership based on deep respect, shared values, and great strength used to good purposes. And we look forward to the future with confidence.

Finally, I note that next month Prime Minister Howard will mark 11 years as the leader of this country. He has certainly borne up well under what Sir Robert Menzies has called "the hammering of the times." John Howard's integrity, his good counsel and his optimistic spirit have only strengthened the warm friendship between our two countries and have added to our effectiveness in the cause of freedom and security.

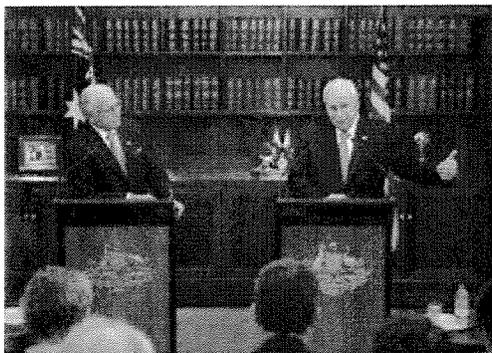
These have been crowded and decisive years, during which all of the world has come to know John Howard as a man of wisdom and character. For myself and for my country, I want to express our gratitude to the Prime Minister for his friendship and for the leadership he's brought to our world.

Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER HOWARD: Okay, have two questions from each side. Olivier?

Q Thank you, Prime Minister. Thank you, Vice President. One for each of you.

Mr. Vice President, you've said that the British draw-down from Iraq reflects their success there and not domestic considerations. Did the United States ask for them to redeploy those troops inside Iraq to take some strain off the U.S. forces involved in the Baghdad Security Plan and in al Anbar province? And if not, why not?



And to you, Prime Minister, the Vice President had some pretty tough words for China yesterday. Do you agree that China's military build-up exceeds their security needs? And what can China do specifically to ease concerns about that?

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: Well, the Brits have been great allies in the efforts -- mutual efforts in Iraq. They have been there from the very beginning, as have our Australian friends. They have to make decisions with respect to their forces based upon what they think makes sense. Prime Minister Blair did consult with President Bush in terms of moving forward, and the comments I made reflected their communications with us, the fact that they believe the situation has improved in Basra and southern Iraq, which has been their prime area of operation.

They're going to continue to have a major presence there. They're also I believe beefing up their operations in Afghanistan at the same time, so we're very comfortable with their decision.

PRIME MINISTER HOWARD: In relation to China, Australia, as you know, has striven over the last decade to build a very close relationship with China. But we've always done it against a background of being realistic about the nature of political society in that country. We have no illusions that China remains an authoritarian country. We have sought to emphasize in our relations with China those practical things that we have in common. And we do, I hope, with appropriate modesty regard it as one of the foreign policy successes of this country over the last decade that we have simultaneously become ever closer in our relationship with our great ally the United States, but at the same time built a very constructive, understandable relationship with China.

But we always look at these things from a practical standpoint. We have no false illusions about the nature of China's society. But we see positive signs in the way in which China and the United States have worked together, particularly in relation to North Korea. And nothing is more important to the stability of our own region at the present time than resolving the North Korean nuclear situation. And I think the way in which China and the United States have worked together on that is wholly positive and is obviously to the credit of both of those countries.

Jim.

Q Question I guess for both of you, but I'll ask specifically for the Vice President. Would the United States like and, indeed, did you seek from the Prime Minister any additional military support in Iraq? And given your belief that Baghdad must be secured, why would the United States not want more military support from its allies within the Sunni Triangle? And secondly, would the U.S.-Australia alliance be damaged if Australia were to withdraw its 500 combat -- I stress combat -- troops from Iraq?

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: Well, I want to emphasize how much we appreciate what our friends in Australia have done from the very beginning both in Iraq and Afghanistan. The cooperation between our militaries has been superb. The contribution on the part of the Australians has been significant in every respect.

I also want to emphasize that decisions about what Australia does going forward with respect to force levels is a decision for the government of Australia. Those decisions are obviously going to be made by the Australian government based on their considerations, as well as I would expect conditions on the ground in that part of the world. It's not for us to suggest to our allies what their appropriate response might be. But certainly, I would say that the government has met our expectations in every regard. Cooperation has been excellent.

Karen.

Q Damage to the alliance?

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: I don't see any prospect of damage to the alliance. I think this alliance has been solid. We've fought together in every major conflict for the last hundred years. I remember coming here 15 years ago to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Coral Sea Battle. We do from time to time, as all governments do in democracies, have differences of opinion on various and sundry issues. But I think the alliance is rock solid. And we are delighted with the way in which it has functioned in the latest go-round. Americans always remember that John Howard was in America on 9/11 and spoke eloquently about the challenge that we face and has been a superb leader and ally in the global war on terror ever since. And we have great respect for that.

Q Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister. I'd like to ask the Vice President a question about Iran. With Tehran ignoring the U.N. deadline to discontinue and Ahmadinejad saying his country must stand up to the world, are you frustrated with the pace of diplomacy on Iran? And also Secretary Rice has said that the North Korea deal will serve as a model for Iran. And I'm just wondering if you could elaborate on that and explain just exactly how? And I'd be interested in the Prime Minister's thoughts about Iran, as well.

VICE PRESIDENT: Well, with respect to the second part of your question in terms of the Secretary's view on North Korea as a model, you really ought to direct those questions to Condi.

With respect to the first part of your question on Iran, we are deeply concerned and have made it very clear we're deeply concerned about Iran's activities. We see a nation that has been fairly aggressive in the Middle East as a sponsor of Hezbollah, working through the Syrians and Hezbollah to create problems for the government of Lebanon. They have made some fairly inflammatory statements -- their President, Ahmadinejad. They appear to be pursuing the development of nuclear weapons through uranium enrichment. We've worked with the European Community and through the United Nations to put in place a set of policies to persuade the Iranians to give up their aspirations and to resolve the matter peacefully. That's still our preference.

But I've also made the point and the President has made the point that all options are still on the table. Next step now is being debated between our government and the others involved. Nick Burns, the number three man in the State Department, is I believe in London today to negotiate with our European friends who have been in the effort, the Brits, the French and the Germans, on the future course of action that we want to pursue with respect to the United Nations sanctions and so forth. And I don't have anything beyond that, that I can say at this point other than that we believe it would be a serious mistake if a nation such as Iran were to become a nuclear power.

PRIME MINISTER HOWARD: I guess, the only additional comment I'd made is in the context of Iraq, I can't think of a country whose influence and potential clout would be more enhanced in that part of the world than Iran's would be if there were to be a coalition defeating Iraq. I don't think you can separate the two. I think the impact on Iran and the way in which Iran would be emboldened if there were a coalition defeat in Iraq. And that would occur if there were a -- that would be seen to have occurred if there were a precipitous coalition withdrawal. I think Iran would benefit enormously from that, and that would to many in the Middle East -- not just the Israelis -- that would be a nightmare scenario.

John.

Q Prime Minister and Mr. Vice President, on the David Hicks issue, you said you raised your concerns with the United States on Mr. Hicks. These concerns have been made for some considerable time. Will the United States allow David Hicks to be returned to Australia? Or could you both tell us exactly whether he will now be presented to trial for the United States?

PRIME MINISTER HOWARD: Well, I did raise my concerns as I have on two occasions recently with President Bush. The concern is about the time. I make no judgment about guilt or innocence. I am no sympathizer of David Hicks. I cannot believe that he was on some kind of hitchhiking tour in Afghanistan. I don't think any person who examines the facts could possibly believe that. And the charges against him are very serious, indeed. And countries that have fighting men and women in Afghanistan have every right to want those charges heard before a court.

He can't be tried in Australia for those alleged activities because they were not crimes at the time they took place. Our sole concern is about the passage of time and the bedrock principle of our legal system and that, indeed, of the -- you might loosely call the Anglo-American legal system that people should not be held indefinitely without trial. And that's the view that I put.

And I have asked that within the constraints of the separation of powers in the United States system between the executive and the judicial process that the trial be brought on as soon as humanly possible and with no further delay. And now I've put that very plainly and I've put it in the context of direct speaking between close friends. It is an issue that concerns me and concerns a lot of my fellow Australians.

We have always thought that the cause of justice was better served by him facing a military commission with enhancements, including a presumption of innocence, which is now entrenched in the process as a result of the

most recent piece of congressional legislation, an appeal to the Supreme Court of the United States, and understanding between Australia and the United States that the unexpired residue of any conviction that Hicks receives, the term can be served in an Australian prison. In other words, the time he's already spent can be deducted from any sentence. Now all of that is understood. And I've put the view that the trial should be as soon as humanly possible.

Now, I think the Vice President understands that. I'm sure he does. He can speak for himself. I certainly put those views very strongly to the President when I last spoke to him. And it's time not so much the merits of the case that matter to me.

VICE PRESIDENT CHENEY: And the Prime Minister is absolutely right about the importance of moving forward as quickly as possible consistent with the basic legal procedures and requirements that are appropriate. The reason there have been delays when we got into this whole business of a global conflict on terror, traditionally, of course, when you are at war, you are allowed under international law to capture enemy combatants and then to hold them. And once the war is over, we release them and send them back to their home country. This is a very different situation where the combatants are unlawful combatants under the international laws of war, and where there's no ready made provision for how you're going to proceed under those circumstances.

What we've done -- what we did initially was to establish military commissions that would try those suspected of having violated the laws of war in some fashion. The precedent for that under our law was -- dated back to our Civil War in the 1860s, as well as during World War II when commissions were used to try German saboteurs, for example. The Supreme Court after World War II upheld the constitutionality of that commission process. And so we went back and we used that to build the commissions that we put in place in connection with the global war on terror. That was challenged, went through a long process in the courts -- 20 some months in terms of wending its way to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court this time gave us a different decision than they had some 50 years before and this time concluded that we had to have explicit authorization from the Congress before we could set up these commissions and that certain requirements had to be met.

We've now met those requirements. We've put the commissions -- created commissions in a manner that's consistent with the Supreme Court's decision, passed legislation through the last session of Congress and are now moving forward.

Mr. Hicks is near the head of the queue, if I can put it in those terms. He has been charged. The question that happens now -- or the issue that arises now is under our procedures there is what's called a convening authority. This is a quasi-judicial function inside the Department of Defense -- a judge, in effect -- who will make the decision based on the charges that have been presented as to whether or not a commission should be convened for the purpose of trying this individual, in this case, Mr. Hicks. We cannot interfere with that process. It is a judicial process. And we're not allowed to call over and say when are you going to be through, or what are you going to decide. We can't influence it. That would be a violation of the procedures.

But I do expect in the not too distant future that piece of the process will get resolved. Once they go to trial, if Mr. Hicks is found guilty, as John said, we have agreed that he can serve his sentence here in Australia. And of course, if he were not found guilty, then he'd presumably be returned to Australia having been found innocent. But that's where we're at now. There's no question that it's taken a long time, longer than I think anybody would have desired. But a lot of that has been due to the fact that we were trying to comply with our own legal processes. And in many cases, lawsuits had been filed, decisions were required by the various courts going through this process in terms of establishing the commissions and the procedures that would be used in conjunction with them.

But the Prime Minister has been very direct with us. We appreciate his candor. He's talked to the President about it, and we've discussed it again this morning. And I can assure you we want to do everything we can to deal with these matters in as expeditious a manner as possible consistent with the statutes and the laws that apply in this case.

PRIME MINISTER HOWARD: Thank you.

END 10:58 A.M. (Local)

Return to this article at:

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/02/20070224-1.html>



CLICK HERE TO PRINT