

Administration of George W Bush, 2005 / Dec. 19

1885

The President's News Conference

December 19, 2005

The President. Welcome Please be seated Thanks.

Last night I addressed the Nation about our strategy for victory in Iraq and the historic elections that took place in the country last week. In a nation that once lived by the whims of a brutal dictator, the Iraqi people now enjoy constitutionally protected freedoms, and their leaders now derive their powers from the consent of the governed. Millions of Iraqis are looking forward to a future with hope and optimism.

The Iraqi people still face many challenges This is the first time the Iraqis are forming a Government under their new Constitution The Iraqi Constitution requires a two-thirds vote of the Parliament for certain top officials, so the formation of the new Government will take time as Iraqis work to build consensus And once the new Iraqi Government assumes office, Iraq's new leaders will face many important decisions on issues such as security and reconstruction, economic reform, and national unity The work ahead will require the patience of the Iraqi people and the patience and support of America and our coalition partners.

As I said last night, this election does not mean the end of violence, but it is the beginning of something new, a constitutional democracy at the heart of the Middle East And we will keep working toward our goal of a democratic Iraq that can govern itself, sustain itself, and defend itself

Our mission in Iraq is critical to victory in the global war on terror. After our country was attacked on September the 11th and nearly 3,000 lives were lost, I vowed to do everything within my power to bring justice to those who were responsible. I also pledged to the American people to do everything within my power to prevent this from happening again What we quickly learned was that Al Qaida was not a conventional enemy. Some lived in our cities and communities and communicated from here in America to plot and plan with bin Laden's lieutenants in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere. Then they boarded our airplanes and launched the

worst attack on our country in our Nation's history

This new threat required us to think and act differently And as the 9/11 Commission pointed out, to prevent this from happening again, we need to connect the dots before the enemy attacks. not after And we need to recognize that dealing with Al Qaida is not simply a matter of law enforcement; it requires defending the country against an enemy that declared war against the United States of America

As President and Commander in Chief, I have the constitutional responsibility and the constitutional authority to protect our country. Article II of the Constitution gives me that responsibility and the authority necessary to fulfill it. And after September the 11th, the United States Congress also granted me additional authority to use military force against Al Qaida.

After September the 11th, one question my administration had to answer was how, using the authorities I have, how do we effectively detect enemies hiding in our midst and prevent them from striking us again? We know that a 2-minute phone conversation between somebody linked to Al Qaida here and an operative overseas could lead directly to the loss of thousands of lives. To save American lives, we must be able to act fast and to detect these conversations so we can prevent new attacks.

So, consistent with U.S. law and the Constitution, I authorized the interception of international communications of people with known links to Al Qaida and related terrorist organizations This program is carefully reviewed approximately every 45 days to ensure it is being used properly. Leaders in the United States Congress have been briefed more than a dozen times on this program. And it has been effective in disrupting the enemy while safeguarding our civil liberties.

This program has targeted those with known links to Al Qaida I've reauthorized this program more than 30 times since the September the 11th attacks, and I intend to do so for so long as our Nation is—for so long as the Nation faces the continuing threat of an enemy that wants to kill American citizens.

I said the other day that a mistake was trying to train a civilian defense force and an Iraqi Army at the same time but not giving the civilian defense force enough training and tools necessary to be able to battle a group of thugs and killers. And so we adjusted.

And the point I'm trying to make to the American people in this, as you said, candid dialog—I hope I've been candid all along, but in the candid dialog—is to say, we're constantly changing our tactics to meet the changing tactics of an enemy. And that's important for our citizens to understand.

Thank you, Kelly [Kelly Wallace, Cable News Network]

Open Dialog on Wiretaps

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. If you believe that present law needs to be faster, more agile, concerning the surveillance of conversations from someone in the United States to somewhere outside the country—

The President. Right.

Q. —why, in the 4 years since 9/11, has your administration not sought to get changes in the law instead of bypassing it, as some of your critics have said?

The President. No, I appreciate that. First, I want to make clear to the people listening that this program is limited in nature to those that are known Al Qaida ties and/or affiliates. That's important. So it's a program that's limited, and you brought up something that I want to stress, and that is, is that these calls are not intercepted within the country. They are from outside the country to in the country or vice versa. So in other words, this is not a—if you're calling from Houston to L.A., that call is not monitored. And if there was ever any need to monitor, there would be a process to do that.

I think I've got the authority to move forward, Kelly. I mean, this is what it's—and the Attorney General was out briefing this morning and I—about why it's legal to make the decisions I'm making. I can fully understand why Members of Congress are expressing concerns about civil liberties. I know that. And it's—I share the same concerns. I want to make sure the American people understand, however, that we have an obligation

to protect you, and we're doing that and, at the same time, protecting your civil liberties.

Secondly, an open debate about law would say to the enemy, "Here's what we're going to do." And this is an enemy which adjusts. We monitor this program carefully. We have consulted with Members of the Congress over a dozen times. We are constantly reviewing the program. Those of us who review the program have a duty to uphold the laws of the United States, and we take that duty very seriously.

Let's see here—Martha [Martha Raddatz, ABC News]—working my way around the electronic media, here.

Domestic Wiretaps

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. You say you have an obligation to protect us. Then why not monitor those calls between Houston and L.A.? If the threat is so great, and you use the same logic, why not monitor those calls? Americans thought they weren't being spied on in calls overseas—why not within the country, if the threat is so great?

The President. We will, under current law, if we have to. We will monitor those calls. And that's why there is a FISA law. We will apply for the right to do so. And there's a difference—let me finish—there is a difference between detecting, so we can prevent, and monitoring. And it's important to know the distinction between the two.

Q. But preventing is one thing, and you said the FISA laws essentially don't work because of the speed in monitoring calls overseas.

The President. I said we use the FISA courts to monitor calls. It's a very important tool, and we do use it. I just want to make sure we've got all tools at our disposal. This is an enemy which is quick, and it's lethal. And sometimes we have to move very, very quickly. But if there is a need based upon evidence, we will take that evidence to a court in order to be able to monitor calls within the United States.

Who haven't I called on, let's see here. Suzanne [Suzanne Malveaux, Cable News Network].