

6:08 P.M. (Local)

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Thank you, guys. Let me say Multinational Force Iraq, Multinational Corps Iraq, Multinational Security Transition Command Iraq First Corps, America's Corp Band: Thanks to all of you.

Listen, I am so honored.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: We love you.

THE PRESIDENT: I love you back. (Applause.) I am honored -- I'm honored and grateful to be with all of you. And I'm not going to talk long because I want to shake as many hands as I can. (Applause.) And I've been talking all week. (Laughter.)

But there's a couple of things I want to say. Number one, thank you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: You're welcome.

THE PRESIDENT: You know, when I was at Camp Lejeune I spoke about what it means for America to see our best and brightest, our finest young men and women serve us. And what I said then is something that I want to repeat to you, which is: You have performed brilliantly in every mission that has been given to you.

AUDIENCE: Ooh-ah.

THE PRESIDENT: Under enormous strain and under enormous sacrifice, through controversy and difficulty and politics, you've kept your eyes focused on just doing your job. And because of that, every mission that's been assigned -- from getting rid of Saddam, to reducing violence, to stabilizing the country, to facilitating elections -- you have given Iraq the opportunity to stand on its own as a democratic country. That is an extraordinary achievement, and for that you have the thanks of the American people. (Applause.) That's point number one.

Point number two is, this is going to be a critical period, these next 18 months. I was just discussing this

with your commander, but I think it's something that all of you know. It is time for us to transition to the Iraqis. (Applause.) They need to take responsibility for their country and for their sovereignty. (Applause.)

And in order for them to do that, they have got to make political accommodations. They're going to have to decide that they want to resolve their differences through constitutional means and legal means. They are going to have to focus on providing government services that encourage confidence among their citizens.

All those things they have to do. We can't do it for them. But what we can do is make sure that we are a stalwart partner, that we are working alongside them, that we are committed to their success, that in terms of training their security forces, training their civilian forces in order to achieve a more effective government, they know that they have a steady partner with us.

And so just as we thank you for what you've already accomplished, I want to say thank you because you will be critical in terms of us being able to make sure that Iraq is stable, that it is not a safe haven for terrorists, that it is a good neighbor and a good ally, and we can start bringing our folks home. (Applause.)

So now is not the time to lose focus. We have to be even more focused than we've been in order to achieve success.

The last point I want to make is I know how hard it's been on a lot of you. You've been away from your families, many of you for multiple rotations. You've seen buddies of yours injured and you remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice.

AUDIENCE: Ooh-ah.

THE PRESIDENT: There are probably some people here who have seen children born and have been missing watching them grow up. There are many of you who have listened to your spouse and the extraordinary sacrifices that they have to make when you're gone.

And so I want you to know that Michelle and myself are doing everything -- (applause) -- are doing everything we

can to provide additional support for military families. The federal budget that I have introduced increases support for military families. We are going to do everything required to make sure that the commitment we make to our veterans is met, and that people don't have to fight for what they have earned as a consequence of their service.

The main point I want to make is we have not forgotten what you have already done, we are grateful for what you will do, and as long as I am in the White House, you are going to get the support that you need and the thanks that you deserve from a grateful nation. (Applause.)

So thank you very much everybody. (Applause.) God bless you. (Applause.) God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

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6:15 P.M.

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