

Remarks on Detainees and Afghanistan
June 18, 2008

As Prepared

Good afternoon. We just finished the first meeting of my new Senior Working Group on National Security. We had a productive discussion about the challenges facing our nation, and I'm grateful that these distinguished men and women will be advising me in the months to come.

As we discussed in the meeting, we face serious challenges to our security. Our nation is fighting two wars. There are terrorists who are determined to kill as many Americans as they can. The world's most dangerous weapons risk falling into the wrong hands. And that is why the single greatest priority of my presidency will be doing anything and everything that I can to keep the American people safe.

In the face of these real threats, we can't afford another campaign in which national security issues – and the truth-- are distorted and manipulated. So let me take this opportunity to talk about some of the attacks that the McCain campaign has made the last few days. For all his talk about civil debate and bipartisanship, Senator McCain has shown that he's going to use predictable, petty and divisive attacks to try to score a few political points on national security. If these attacks seem familiar, it's because they are. It's the same tired political playbook that George Bush and Karl Rove have used for eight years. And it's a political strategy that's been used to prop up policies that have completely failed.

First, let me say a few words about Guantanamo. By any measure, our system of trying detainees has been an enormous failure. Over the course of nearly seven years, there has not been a single conviction for a terrorist act at Guantanamo. There has been just one conviction for material support for terrorism. Meanwhile, this legal black hole has substantially set back America's ability to lead the world against the threat of terrorism, and undermined our most basic values. Make no mistake: we are less safe because of the way George Bush has handled this.

My approach is guided by a simple premise: I have confidence that our system of justice is strong enough to deal with terrorists; Senator McCain does not. That is not the same as giving these detainees the same full privileges as Americans citizens. I never said that, the Supreme Court never said that, and I would never do that as President of the United States. So either Senator McCain's campaign doesn't understand what the Court decided, or they are distorting my position.

I have made the same arguments as Republicans like Arlen Specter, countless Generals and national security experts, and the largely Republican-appointed Supreme Court of the United States of America – which is that we need not throw away 200 years of American jurisprudence while we fight terrorism. We do not need to choose between our most deeply held values, and keeping this nation safe. That's a false choice, and I completely reject it.

Now in their attempt to distort my position, Senator McCain's campaign has said I want to pursue a law enforcement approach to terrorism. This is demonstrably false, since I have laid out a comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy that includes military force, intelligence operations, financial sanctions and diplomatic action. But the fact that I want to abide by the United States Constitution, they say, shows that I have a "pre-9/11 mindset."

Well I refuse to be lectured on national security by people who are responsible for the most disastrous set of foreign policy decisions in the recent history of the United States. The other side likes to use 9/11 as a political bludgeon. Well, let's talk about 9/11.

The people who were responsible for murdering 3,000 Americans on 9/11 have not been brought to justice. They are Osama bin Laden, al Qaeda and their sponsors – the Taliban. They were in Afghanistan. And yet George Bush and John McCain decided in 2002 that we should take our eye off of Afghanistan so that we could invade and occupy a country that had absolutely nothing to do with 9/11. The case for war in Iraq was so thin that George Bush and John McCain had to hype the threat of Saddam Hussein, and make false promises that we'd be greeted as liberators. They misled the American people, and took us into a misguided war.

Here are the results of their policy. Osama bin Laden and his top leadership – the people who murdered 3000 Americans – have a safe-haven in northwest Pakistan, where they operate with such freedom of action that they can still put out hate-filled audiotapes to the outside world. That's the result of the Bush-McCain approach to the war on terrorism.

We had al Qaeda and the Taliban on the run back in 2002. But then we diverted military, intelligence, financial, and diplomatic resources to Iraq. And yet Senator McCain has said as recently as this April that, "Afghanistan is not in trouble because of our diversion to Iraq." I think that just shows a dangerous misjudgment of the facts, and a stubborn determination to ignore the need to finish the fight in Afghanistan.

Our military is overstretched in Iraq. We have nearly 150,000 troops in Iraq, many on their second, third, or fourth tour of duty. Meanwhile, Afghanistan is sliding toward chaos, and risks turning into a narco-terrorist state. The Taliban is on the offensive in the south. A recent Taliban prison break in Kandahar freed hundreds of militants, and underscored the volatile situation on the ground. The coalition casualties in Afghanistan last month were higher than in Iraq. That's the result of the Bush-McCain approach to the war on terrorism.

We need more resources in Afghanistan. I have been arguing for this since 2002, when I said that we should finish the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban instead of going into Iraq. I have called for at least two additional combat brigades to support our efforts there. I have also called for at least \$1 billion in non-military assistance each year. And I have repeatedly challenged George Bush and John McCain's refusal to hold the Pakistani government accountable for their inability to crack down on al Qaeda and the

Taliban operating within their borders. Because we are not going to get Afghanistan right until we get our Pakistan policy right.

So we have a choice in this election. We can listen to the other side make the same false arguments about why we need to violate our Constitution, stay in Iraq indefinitely, build permanent bases in a country that doesn't want them, and keep shortchanging our effort in Afghanistan and our ability to deal with nearly every other national security challenge that we face. We can do that.

Or, we can finally end this disastrous approach to national security. Because the record shows that George Bush and John McCain have been weak on terrorism. Their approach has failed. Because of their policies, we are less safe, less respected, and less able to lead the world. It's time to turn the page. It's time to end the war in Iraq responsibly. It's time to stop wasting time, and to start putting away terrorists. It's time to finally take out al Qaeda's top leadership, and to finish the fight in Afghanistan. It's time to restore our standing so that we can once again lead the world. That's why I'm running for President of the United States.