

Remarks by President Trump in Briefing at Al Asad Air Base | Al Anbar Province, Iraq

 trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-briefing-al-asad-air-base-al-anbar-province-iraq

Al Asad Air Base
Al Anbar Province, Iraq

7:38 P.M. AST

THE PRESIDENT: So we're meeting with some of our great leaders. We're in Iraq. We flew all night and arrived very safely. It was an interesting trip, I will tell you that. I know there was a lot of security up there in the air, the skies — they tell me. But here we are. We're discussing strategy. We're discussing lots of things, including even nearby Syria.

We're — there's no military like we have. We can do whatever we want. But we have to decide what's right, what's not right. They've done a fantastic job over the last two years that I've been here. I can tell you, speaking from personal knowledge, they've done a fantastic job. And it's a great honor to meet all of you, and we're going to be meeting some other people a little bit later. And then we're going to be speaking in front of your troops, and I look forward to that. That'll be happening in a little while.

And I want to thank the press. You've made a journey. You knew where you were going, and we appreciate your coming with us, very much so. That takes courage also. We very much appreciate you coming with us. So thank you very much.

Do you have any questions in the media?

Q Why did you want to come to Iraq?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it's a place that I've been talking about for many years. And many, many years, before it started, I was talking about it, as a civilian. And many of you know what my feelings were. And I wanted to come and see Iraq. I wanted to come and pay my respects, most importantly, to the great soldiers, the great troopers that we have here. Nobody better.

We brought along John Bolton, brought along the First Lady, and some other great people — very talented people. But I wanted to see what we were doing over here. I tell you what, I'm very impressed with these folks. We've gotten a lot of communication through the White House, but I wanted to see it firsthand. And so we flew — we left at about 11:00, and we flew all night. And I think it's going to be well worth it.

Q Mr. President, what effect will your decision in Syria to pull out the 2,000 troops have here in Iraq?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, you know, we can do things from Iraq that — we can take over some of the slack. But, as you know, we've knocked out about 99 percent of the caliphate. It's time to bring them back.

I told the generals — about a year and a half ago, I said, "Let's get out of Syria." And they said, "Sir, can we have some more time?" I said, "Yep. You've got another six months. Let's get out of Syria." I've said it for a long time. And then — and other places, too, I was talking about. But let's talk about Syria.

I said, "Let's get out of Syria. Let's bring our young people home." And they said, "Sir, could we have six more months?" I said, "Yep. You've got six more months. Let's go." And I gave them six months. Then I said, "Let's get out." And they said, "Sir, could we have six more months?" I said, "Yep. You've got six more months."

And then they said again, recently, "Could we have more time?" I said, "Nope. You can't have any more time. You've got enough time."

We've knocked them out. We've knocked them silly. I will tell you that I had some very good talks with President Erdogan, who wants to knock them out also. And he'll do it. And others will do it, too, because we're in their region; they should be really sharing the burden of cost, and they're not.

And now they're going to be doing it. And if they don't, they're going to go in, and they'll go into places like Turkey and Russia and Iran and Iraq and lots of others places.

So these people are going to have to start doing a lot of their own work, and they're going to have to start paying for it, because the United States cannot continue to be the policeman of the world. We don't want to do that. We want to protect our country. These people want to protect our country. They've been here a long time.

Q Do you have any plans to pull the forces out of Iraq as well?

THE PRESIDENT: No plans at all, no. In fact, we could use this as a base if we wanted to do something in Syria. If — I will say this, if you take ISIS and if we see something happening with ISIS that we don't like, we can hit them so fast and so hard, they won't — they really won't know what the hell happened.

But it's time to get our soldiers out, and it's time to get our young people out. And I've been signing plenty of letters, and I don't like sending those letters home to parents, saying that your young man or your young woman has been killed. And I don't like doing it. We've been doing it long enough.

We've been here, and if you look at Afghanistan, 19 years. We've been doing it a long time. And these people at this table have been incredible. These are incredible people. And these are incredible men and women. But we've been doing it a long time.

So I gave notice in Syria — you know, the way it was reported was like I just pulled out; I didn't just pull out. I've been talking about it for a year and a half. I've been telling the generals, "Let's go. Go ahead, take more time. Let's go. Take more time." Constantly giving them more time. Finally, I said, "Okay, it's now time for others to take over that fight." We don't want to be there.

If you look at Syria — so we went there about eight years ago, and it was supposed to be for a three-month period of time. We never left. It's time to bring our people back home.

Thank you.

Q Sir, what do you make of people like Lindsey Graham, who say you're making a mistake?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I had a good debate with Lindsey Graham in front of a lot of people the other day. And I think even Lindsey would say that that had a big impact (inaudible). Lindsey Graham is somebody that I like, that we work together — we agree on many things. We agreed on Justice Kavanaugh, Justice Gorsuch. We agreed on many things.

I think that a lot of people are going to come around to my way of thinking. It's not fair when we burden the — when the burden is all on us, the United States. We're building now — as you folks know, you're seeing new equipment coming in for the first time in many years — \$716 billion and \$700 billion, the last two years. Far more than you ever got.

And now we're buying all beautiful, new fighter jets. And we're buying — we're building new ships. We're doing a lot of new things, even the equipment for your men and women.

But it's time for us to start using our head. We don't want to be taken advantage anymore by countries that use us and use our incredible military to protect them. They don't pay for it, and they're going to have to.

Now, if you look at what happened in Syria, President Erdogan stepped up, and he says he wants to knock out ISIS. We say, "Whatever's left." It's just the remnants of ISIS. And Saudi Arabia just came out and said they're going to pay for some economic development, which is great. That means we don't have to pay.

But we may help, at some point. We may go back and help. We can do a lot of things with our companies and others, where they go out and they do a great job.

But the bottom line is: We're going to use our heads, and wealthy countries cannot continue to use the United States to defend them. These are wealthy countries. These are seriously wealthy countries, in certain cases, that I'm talking about. I'm not only talking about in the Middle East. I'm talking about all over the world. Wealthy countries cannot expect the United States to pay for a vast majority of their military. They can pay us. They can reimburse us.

There's nobody has a military like us, but we're all over the world. We're spread out all over the world. We're in countries that most people have never even heard about. And, frankly, it's ridiculous.

So that's the story. It's very simple. I wanted to come to Iraq. I wanted to meet these great heroes. And that's what we're doing, and that's why we're here. That's why we took that flight.

Q Mr. President?

THE PRESIDENT: Yeah.

Q About the criticism that, by leaving Syria, you might increase jeopardy for Israel, how do you respond?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't see it. And I spoke with Bibi. I told Bibi. And, you know, we give Israel \$4.5 billion a year. And they're doing very well defending themselves, if you take a look.

But we'll be there for Israel. We'll always be there for Israel. I'm the one that moved the embassy to Jerusalem. You know, nobody was willing to do that. All these Presidents came and went. They all said they will do it. They never did it. Many, many Presidents said they were going to move the embassy to Jerusalem. They never did it; I did it. Big difference.

So that's the way it is. We're going to take good care of Israel. Israel is going to be good. But we give Israel \$4.5 billion a year. And we give them, frankly, a lot more money than that, if you look at the books — a lot more money than that. And they've been doing a very good job for themselves.

Q Sir, what about the timing of this trip, coming during a government shutdown back in Washington?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I did this — about three or four weeks ago, we set this up. We actually had a couple of them set up, and we cancelled for security reasons because people were finding out.

Pretty sad, when you spend \$7 trillion in the Middle East, and going in has to be under this massive cover, with planes all over and all of the greatest equipment in the world, and you do everything you can to get in safely. Pretty sad. You spend \$7 trillion, and you have to come in through military escorts and all of the other incredible things that they did. Incredible.

Q How long do you think the shutdown will last, Mr. President?

THE PRESIDENT: Whatever it takes. I mean, we're going to have a wall. We're going to have safety. We need safety for our country, even from this standpoint. We have terrorists coming in through the southern border. We have the terrorists also coming in, fellas, through the southern border. Because you know why? It was always the easiest.

Now, we've made it very tough, but — I won't put them on the spot, but I guarantee you, they would say, "You don't have a wall, you're not going to have..." I mean, the folks that are saying, "Can we have some drones? Can we have technology?" Technology is bells and whistles. You have to have a wall. You have to have protection.

But we have, in addition to drugs, in addition to human trafficking, in addition to mass numbers of illegals who are coming in — many of whom are criminals. You saw that. Six hundred and eighteen, so far, that we found — in some cases, very serious criminals. In some cases, murderers. You saw that yourselves. It was on your cameras for everybody to see.

We need a wall. So when you say, "How long is it going to take?" When are they going to say that we need border security? When are the Democrats going to say it? Don't forget, the Democrats all agreed that you need a wall, until I wanted it. Once I wanted it, they didn't agree.

Steve.

Q What's your timeline on a new Defense Secretary?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, we have wonderful man in there now, as you know. Our friend, Shanahan, is a good man, and he's done a great job. And he's a good buyer. I wanted somebody that could buy, because I'm giving a lot of money and I don't want it to be wasted.

You know, when I came here, they were spending — for a \$4 billion aircraft carrier, they were up to \$16 billion. That's not me; that's them. I inherited that and many other things. Cost overruns all over the place.

So Shanahan was at Boeing, and did a great job at Boeing. He was there for a long time. Boeing is a hell of a company. He did a great job. Very responsible for the success of a certain plane, the Dreamliner. And he's a respected man. He could be there for a long time. I mean, I'm in no rush.

I will say that I've got everybody — everybody and his uncle wants that position. And also, by the way, everybody and her aunt — just so I won't be criticized for that last statement.

Everybody wants that position. Everybody. Everybody — so many people want to be — who wouldn't want to be Secretary of Defense? Even these folks would like to be Secretary of Defense. Who wouldn't want to be? This guy, he's looking over there. He said, "Boy, I would like that (inaudible)." (Laughter.)

So we have a lot of people. We have a lot of great people who want to be Secretary of Defense. We'll take our time and we'll make the right decision.

Q Mr. President, have you come down from \$5 billion to \$2 billion for border security in the conversations with Democrats?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, you know — as you know, we've already built a lot of wall. We're building a lot more, you know, just through the normal budget. And we fixed a tremendous amount of wall — many miles. Sarah can give you the numbers. Sarah Sanders can give you the numbers. But we've fixed a lot of wall, and we've renovated it. It's very, very good. It's as good as new. And, you know, many, many miles of that.

And we've also built new wall a lot. But we just gave out a contract that, when it's all completed out, it'll be 115 miles. That's a lot. We're talking about 500 to 550 miles. And this will be — just this one contract is 115. I'm going there — I assume you're coming with me — on probably the end of January, a little bit before the State of the Union. I think we're going to do it before the State of the Union Address. I'll be going to Texas, and we're going to be sort of having a long — we'll have a long groundbreaking, because it covers a lot of territory. But we're going to have a groundbreaking for the wall.

Q But as to the matter of negotiations, sir, have you come down from the \$5 billion ask to \$2 billion? That's a perception Democrats have.

THE PRESIDENT: Here's the problem — yeah, here's the problem we have: We have a problem with the Democrats because Nancy Pelosi is calling the shots, not Chuck. And Chuck wants to have this done. I really believe that. He wants to have this done. But she's calling the shots, and she's calling them because she wants the votes.

And probably, if they do something, she's not going to get the votes, and she's not going to be Speaker of the House. And that would be not so good for her. Because she's got — you know, she's in a very tight contest. I know her contest very well; I know it maybe better than she does. I know exactly where she is. And she's in a very, very tight contest. There are those that say she doesn't have the votes yet. Let's see what happens. I say she does.

But if Chuck does this, it could very well have negative implications on her becoming Speaker of the House. So they all know you need it; they all know you need this border security. They all know you need the wall — or whatever you want to call it — in order to secure our border, which these people know more about than anybody. And they can tell you, you need a wall. But the one who is calling the shots is Nancy Pelosi.

Q Will you accept \$2 billion instead of \$5 billion, sir?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm not going to talk about it now. But I will say this: We have been building a lot of wall. A lot of people don't know it, and I haven't really been stressing it, frankly, because maybe I felt it wasn't the right thing to do. But we've been building a lot of wall. If you go out, you'll see it. Or we can give you an exact list. Sarah, you'll do that.

But we're building now — we just gave out a contract, as you know; I just released it the other day. But we are building a lot of wall. We have a lot of great wall going in the most important places. We're starting in the most important places, which I would say history says, fellas, that's a good thing to do, right? Do the most important places first and do the least important places last.

So we are probably up to — with what we're building now and what we're going to start very shortly, we're probably up to over 200 miles of wall. Nobody knows that, nor did I want to tell anybody. So we are moving very rapidly. And I have other sources if I need them. But we have to do it the right way.

Look, the American public is demanding a wall. I think they're under a lot of pressure. The problem is, we need 10 Democrat votes in the Senate. The House is 100 percent. You saw that. Nancy said we'd never get the votes in the House. Not only did we get them, we got them by a lot — 217 to 185. I mean, we got them by a lot. Nobody believed that.

Nancy Pelosi sat, and she said you couldn't get the votes in the House. And then we got the votes in the House. And that was for \$5.8 billion.

So we're doing well. The problem is, we need 10 votes in the Senate, and they have to be Democrat votes. They can't — you know, people don't understand. They hear we have the majority. Well, we have, right now, the majority by one. Soon, we'll have the majority by three because we won the Senate and we picked up. Nobody ever reports that, but we won the Senate and we picked up two seats, which is — you know, someday one of you guys are going to get out and actually report that. There are those that say it's more important because that's what approves Supreme Court judges, judges, people — everything.

But we won the Senate, and people were very surprised at how well we did in the Senate. We almost won three additional seats that we weren't expected to be anywhere near.

So Nancy is calling the shots. And they all know — look, politically speaking — I don't do it for politics; I'm doing nothing for politics. But, politically speaking, people want border security, okay?

One more question?

MS. SANDERS: We'll take one more question.

THE PRESIDENT: One more.

Q Did you have any concerns about coming here today?

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely, when I heard what you had to go through.

Q What did you go through?

THE PRESIDENT: I mean, look, I had concerns for the institution of the presidency because — not for myself, personally. I had concerns for the First Lady, I will tell you. But if you would have seen what we had to go through, with the darkened plane, with all windows closed, with no lights on whatsoever, anywhere — pitch black. I've never seen it; I've been in many airplanes — all types and shapes and sizes. I've never seen anything like it. We're coming in, and I know all of the things that were surrounding us for safety.

So did I have a concern? Yeah, I had a concern, but my bigger concern was maybe the people that were with me, certainly all of them — except, I think, John Bolton. He's a pretty tough guy. He can handle it. Right, John? John can handle it.

And, by the way, John and I agree on all of this. And I think John will say that we went through numerous — extension, extension, extension. John — and John is, you know, pretty strong on the subject. He's pretty strong. He's pretty hawkish on everything having to do with the military.

And, by the way, I think I'm probably more hawkish than anybody. Anybody. Nobody is more hawkish than me. But I also like to use it in the right place. And, frankly, I like not using it at all.

And one of the things we're doing is we are building the greatest force that we've ever had, that we've ever had. We've never had a force like we're building, in terms of the equipment. We have the best people, to start off with.

And by doing what I'm doing, hopefully, we won't have to use it. But there is nobody that believes more strongly in having a powerful military than I do. And we're respected once again in the world, and that's nice to see because our military — I'm not going to put them on the spot, but our military was seriously depleted when I took office. Seriously depleted. It was in bad shape. And very soon, it's going to be phenomenal shape.

Okay? Thank you all very much.

END 7:57 P.M. AST