

Remarks on Departure for Bethesda, Maryland

May 12, 2004

Execution of Nicholas Berg

I want to express my condolences to the family and friends of Nicholas Berg. Nicholas Berg was an innocent civilian who was in Iraq to help build a free Iraq. There is no justification for the brutal execution of Nicholas Berg—no justification whatsoever.

The actions of the terrorists who executed this man remind us of the nature of the few people who want to stop the advance of freedom in Iraq. Their intention is to shake our will. Their intention is to shake our confidence. Yet, by their actions, they remind us of how desperately parts of the world need free societies and peaceful societies, and we will complete our mission. We will complete our task.

Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1 p.m. on the South Lawn at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to American hostage Nicholas Berg, who was killed in Iraq in early May by senior Al Qaida associate Abu Musab Al Zarqawi.

Remarks in a Discussion at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland

May 12, 2004

The President. Thanks, Reid. Thank you all for coming. What he forgot to tell you is, I've known Reid for a long time. See, when I was the Governor of Texas, I was worried that we weren't using a curriculum, a reading curriculum that would work. So I said to Margaret Spellings, who is my Domestic Policy Adviser here in Washington, I said, "Who's the best in the country about figuring out how to teach children how to read?" And they said, "Reid Lyon." I said, "Okay, get him up here," or "Get him down here," in this case. He was here in Washington. He came down, and we've had a great relationship ever since.

Today we're going to talk about reading and that reading is more of a science than people think. And the reason we're here at the National Institutes of Health is because

this facility uses Federal taxpayers' money to research, to figure out how to solve problems. We've got a problem in America. And the problem is, not every child can read at grade level, so we're here to discuss a strategy to insist that every child does read at grade level. To me, it's a national—we have an obligation nationally to make sure of this.

I'll never forget the reading czarina of Houston Independent School District—and by the way, Secretary of Education Rod Paige was the superintendent of the Houston Independent School District at the time. He had hired this lady to help teach every child to read. She said, "Governor, I want to tell you, reading is the new civil right." That's what I think. I think if you cannot read in the 21st century, you don't have a chance to succeed. And we believe every child can read.

Mr. Secretary, thanks for coming. Rod Paige is a fellow who was on the frontlines of education there as the superintendent in Harris County District. And I asked him to come up and be the Secretary of Education, Reid, because he understands the correct attitude about making sure public schools work. It's really embodied in the No Child Left Behind Act.

Let me go through real quick what that act says. It says, first of all, "We believe every child can learn." In other words, we need to raise the bar and raise the standards. It's what I call challenging the soft bigotry of low expectations. It means basically that when you walk into a classroom full of the so-called hard to educate, you don't quit. That's what it means.

Secondly, it says that in return for increased Federal spending—which we've increased Federal spending quite a bit here in Washington, DC—that we expect results. In other words, the cornerstone of making sure every child can learn to read is you've got to measure to determine where they are. And if not, if you're finding children can't read at early ages, correct it early, before it's too late. And we're going to talk about that here.

Thirdly, it says that there must be consequences for schools that won't teach and won't change. In other words, something has to happen other than just posting scores to get parental involvement. What we now have

got is a system where, after a period of time, if the schools won't teach a child to read, Federal money follows the child so the child can get tutoring, for example, or the child can go to a different public school.

Finally, the cornerstone of good education policy is local control of schools. We're going to hear from some folks from Alabama and Arizona who are great teachers, who understand it is really important for there to be the ability for people to make decisions, to align authority and response at the local level.

Governor Ehrlich is with us. I'm sure he's glad to hear that the Federal Government isn't going to run the schools in the State of Maryland. He's plenty capable of doing it, along with the people he's picked to run the schools and be responsible for public policy, like the Lieutenant Governor, Mike Steele, and Nancy Grasmick, who's the head of the education department in Maryland. I want to thank you all for coming, Governor. I appreciate you taking your time for being here.

I also want to thank Elias Zerhouni, who's in charge of NIH. Elias, I'm proud of the job you're doing. You've got a tough job, and I picked a good man to do it, and I really appreciate you being here. I'm glad Claude Allen is here as well. He's the Deputy Secretary of Health and Human Services. You're doing a fine job too, Claude. I'm proud you guys are here. Thanks for coming.

I'm going to turn this over to Reid here in a second. But if the goal is to have children reading at grade level by the third grade, which is a goal we have set—and by the way, some people have been criticizing the No Child Left Behind Act because they say the standards are too high. I don't think that's too high a standard, to expect a child to read at third grade when they're in the third grade. As a matter of fact, you know, I think it is perfectly reasonable to ask school districts to at least accomplish that. But to do it, we've got to advance a—help advance a strategy. I think it is a proper role for the Federal Government to help school districts implement reading strategies that work.

And Reid Lyon has been very much involved in figuring out what works. And you'll hear him talk about phonemic awareness and phonics and fluency. I'm going to let him de-

scribe what all those words mean. But really what they mean is there's a way to figure out whether or not the curriculum being used at the local level can be effective, that's what he's saying.

And so we put forth a Reading First Initiative across the country. And part of it, obviously, requires Federal commitment, Federal dollars. We've got \$1.8 billion now we're spending on Reading First programs. We intend to spend 5 billion over a 5-year period of time.

So far, we're making good progress. In 2002, all 50 States are participating in the grantmaking process. In other words, they've developed curriculums screened by people like Reid who say, "Gosh, this will work." In other words, we don't want to spend money unless people are using curriculum that works. There's no need to throw good money into programs that won't work. We've tried that before.

And so the grant programs seem like they're going well. The screening process is going well. There are 1,000 districts that now get Reading First grants. There are 3,600 schools getting Reading First grants. There's been 73,000 teachers trained in the curriculum that works. Part of making sure that a Reading First program works, part of making sure that children can read at the grade level by the third grade is to make sure you've got teachers who can teach by the third grade—teachers who can teach curriculum to make sure children can read by the third grade. One-point-two million students are being affected.

By the way, Ralph Regula is with us today as well. I just saw Ralph sneak in here. Mr. Chairman, thanks for coming. He's a strong advocate of the Reading First program. He's a United States Congressman from the State of Ohio. The fact you're here, Mr. Chairman, says a lot about your interest. You're probably wondering when I'm going to stop talking. You know how we are when we get a mike.

As well I just want you to know—and we've discussed some of this today—we've got an early Reading First program, which really starts in the pre-K period as well as—and you're going to hear an interesting program called Striving Readers Initiative. This basically says that if you don't hold people

to account early in the system, it is likely people are going to get shuffled through the schools without being able to read, see. And we're beginning to find out that's the truth, and we're finding people in junior high and high school who can't read. We need intensive intervention programs. At the very minimum, when a kid gets out of high school, they ought to be able to read, see. And you'll hear an interesting program developed by this good man to my left here, about how to be successful.

What we're talking about is making sure we meet an obligation in our country to give people the chance to succeed in this great country, and I'm telling you we can do it. I have seen incredible progress. We test for a reason, because we want to know, and the reading scores are beginning to go up. And I believe it has a lot to do with the research that Reid Lyon has done here at the NIH facilities here. I believe that when you can figure out the key to reading and convince people to use the proper strategy, every child can learn to read. I refuse to accept anything less than that. I refuse to lower the bar for kids.

And so, therefore, my job as your President is to continue to challenge and push and insist on high standards. And we're making progress. Reid, I'm really proud of the work you do. He's about to tell us—what do you do—[laughter]—and how do you do it?

[Dr. G. Reid Lyon, Chief, Child Development and Behavior Branch, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, made brief remarks.]

The President. You know, people are going to say, "Well, that sounds good. How do you know it works?" And as you know, I'm a how-do-you-know-it-works kind of guy. Reid mentioned there is a debate. Governors are very familiar with the reading curriculum debate, and there are some very strong opinions about what might work, what might not work. I'm the kind of fellow that says, "You ought to be able to figure it out pretty clearly."

Why are you so certain that your attitude is the right attitude?

[Dr. Lyon made further remarks.]

The President. Good. Well, I—anyway. This is based upon science, is what I'm telling you, see. And if you've got something that works, then it makes sense to spread the news. So that's what we're talking about here: How do we make sure the research that has been done here in Washington is shared around the country?

We've got another expert here in reading, the professor and director of the Center of Research of Learning at the University of Kansas—Don Deshler is with us. I first learned of Don when Laura, who is very much involved with reading—she was a school librarian. She loves to read. She believes every child can read. She believes every child must read, and she also understands that there is some need for some serious intervention programs in certain schools. So she met Don in Florida, and she came back and she said, "You're not going to believe this guy. He's got a fabulous program." I said, "Okay, we'll put him on the stage and see if he can explain it." [Laughter]

Tell us what you do.

[Dr. Donald D. Deshler, professor and director of the Center for Research on Learning, University of Kansas, made brief remarks.]

The President. I was going to say, so what do you have to do to get the Michigan school to—did you design a curriculum? Did you have teacher training? What was it?

[Dr. Deshler made further remarks.]

The President. Yes, thanks. Gosh, glad you came. [Laughter] Glad Laura told me about you. [Laughter] I love your attitude. What he's talking about, this initiative, the Intervention Initiative, to make sure junior high students and high school students at least have the capacity to read, is something I've sent up to Congress, Mr. Chairman. We need to get it funded. He's got a program that works. The role of the Federal Government is to fund the capacity for districts to take the program, implement it, and make it happen.

I agree with you that because of the reforms that are now in place, high schools are going to start seeing a more literate population. The problem is, we've got a gap, and we've got to make sure that we do everything

we can to intervene and help those kids. If you can't read, it doesn't matter. That's just as simple as that. I mean, I know that doesn't sound very nuanced or sophisticated, but it's true. It's the absolute truth.

And we're here talking about making sure everybody can. Governor, I want you to pay attention to this program because I bet you there's some schools in the State of Maryland that could use a little intervention, particularly at the junior high and high school level. This works. And this good man here has taken a scientific approach to developing a curriculum, which is relatively easy to implement, I would guess. I mean, it doesn't—

Dr. Deshler. Well, I—good teaching, I believe, is a challenge, and it requires hard work. But if we follow known principles of instruction, the payoff is enormous.

The President. Yes. The—I'm glad you brought up Michigan, because Faith Stevens is with us. She is the Reading First Coordinator for the whole State, right? That's a big job. I'm really glad you're here. How's it going? Are you implementing the Reading First Initiative?

[Faith Stevens, Reading First coordinator, Michigan Department of Education, Lansing, MI, made brief remarks.]

The President. Great job. Thank you. You know, one of the interesting comments I've heard, and I'm confident others who are involved with public policy when it comes to education have heard, they say, you know, "All you're doing is teaching the test. Don't test, because all you're doing is teaching the test." Listen, if you teach a child how to read, they will pass a reading test.

I've heard every excuse in the book why not to measure. But if you can't measure, how do you know? And you heard the great deal of satisfaction from that teacher as a result of correctly utilizing an accountability system to make sure that she was doing the right thing, that she was able to impart her love. And the joy as a result of teaching a child to read was evident in her statement. As a matter of fact, tell her, "Thanks for teaching." Tell her, "Thanks for being also agile enough of mind to be willing to change, if change is needed." We can't be risk-ad-

verse when it comes to making sure every child learns to read.

Speaking about teachers, we've got Janice Kantor with us. She came all the way from Phoenix, Arizona, for which we are grateful. Welcome. She is a Reading First literacy coach. It's kind of an interesting title, isn't it? When I went to Sam Houston Elementary School in Midland, I don't remember any literacy coaches. [Laughter] I remember a football coach. [Laughter] But I think it's a really interesting evolution that we've got literacy coaches, which should say to people that reading is more important than athletics. They're both important, but we better make sure they read.

So what does a literacy coach do?

[Janice Kantor, Reading First literacy coach, Westwind Primary School, Phoenix, AZ, made brief remarks.]

The President. Fabulous. Thanks for coming. Pretty strong spirit, isn't it? I really appreciate that. Thank you for being here. You know, I think one of the things we have to address is why teacher colleges aren't teaching reading teachers how to teach in the first place, so you don't need to retrain.

Maybe that's another project for you, Reid. [Laughter] Maybe it's my project. But thank you for retraining teachers. Listen, teachers are a really loving people, and they care deeply about their profession and their desire to pass on knowledge, and sometimes they just don't have the skills to be able to do so. It's got to be frustrating. It wasn't frustrating if you didn't measure, because you didn't know. But then when you start using the accountability system that all of a sudden points out that, oops, maybe I ought to get a—find a new skill so I can do my job.

We've got Cynthia Henderson with us from Montgomery, Alabama. I'm really glad you're here. Cynthia is a kindergarten teacher. And she went through the Reading First training program, and why don't you tell us what that was like. As I understand, it was slightly intimidating to begin with. Is that an accurate assessment?

[Cynthia Henderson, kindergarten teacher, Floyd Elementary School, Montgomery, AL, made brief remarks.]

The President. Yes, benchmark means—explain to—benchmark means they met expectations.

Ms. Henderson. They met every expectation for the entire year.

The President. And so what she's saying is she just kind of sent these little fellows and little ladies off to a glorious future because they've got the foundations for reading.

Ms. Henderson. And you know, because I work at a school that, where most of the children that are enrolled there are either on poverty level or below poverty level, it means so much to me because some of them are going to be the first ones in their families to even attend college.

The President. There you go.

Ms. Henderson. It is so exciting that they're so excited about reading. And I think it's all about changing a school, that changes a community, that changes a whole city, that changes a State, that changes a whole nation of readers.

The President. There you go. I agree. One of the things that's very important in the measurement system is to do what I call "disaggregate the data." Some districts didn't like measuring specific groups of people because you could pass the standards if you put every—lumped everybody together. But that didn't tell the whole truth about who was learning and who wasn't learning.

And so as part of the new accountability system, the No Child Left Behind Act, we break out based upon race. It's really essential we do that. It's really important. If you don't do that, you're likely to leave people behind. And that's not right. There's a learning—there's an achievement gap in America that will be closed. It must be closed, and will be closed. It won't be closed unless you're honest about the achievement gap, unless you're able to see clearly who needs help and who doesn't need help.

What you've heard here, teachers and coaches and implementers who understand that the accountability system must be used as a tool to make sure that the curriculum being used, the techniques being used, the strategy being used, works. That's what you're hearing.

If you heard—they said, "We look at the test results per child." Inside the classroom,

that's good, but schools and districts need to look at the test results per child as well and not try to gloss over the reality in certain school districts by lumping everybody together. This act is called the No Child Left Behind Act because we want to make sure no child is left behind, not it's okay that some get left behind. That's not the spirit of the law.

I hope you've enjoyed this as much as I have. This is a—again, we came here because the discussions we were having were based upon sound science, not guesswork. And like you, sir, I am incredibly optimistic that we're getting it right here in America. We're getting it right because smart people have help. Policymakers understand what works. We're getting it right because people are continuing to devise strategies to help children who need continued help. We're getting it right because we're providing resources to make sure teachers get retrained with curriculum that works. We're getting it right because we've got fabulous teachers in the classroom—coaches and teachers, I might want you to know—whose spirit can lift the room here at the NIH with just a few words.

And listen, we will meet the goal here. We have an obligation to meet the goal to make sure every child can read at grade level, starting by the third grade. And there's no doubt in my mind this country will do it. We're on track, and I want to appreciate those who put us on track and who keep us on track for being here today.

God bless.

NOTE: The President spoke at 1:27 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Phyllis C. Hunter, former manager, Reading Department, Houston Independent School District; and Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich, Jr., and Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele of Maryland.

Statement on the Panama-United States Proliferation Security Initiative Ship-Boarding Agreement

May 12, 2004

The United States welcomes Panama's signing today of a ship-boarding agreement that supports the efforts of the Proliferation