

# Bush: Iraq Bombers 'Are Having an Effect'



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By *TERENCE HUNT, AP White House Correspondent*

WASHINGTON - In a sobering assessment of the Iraq ([news - web sites](#)) war, President Bush ([news - web sites](#)) acknowledged Monday that Americans' resolve has been shaken by grisly scenes of death and destruction and he pointedly criticized the performance of U.S.-trained Iraqi troops. "No question about it," he said. "The bombers are having an effect."



AP Photo

At a year-end news conference, the president also refused to say whether his strategy for overhauling Social Security ([news - web sites](#)) would entail cutting benefits, raising the retirement age or limiting benefits for wealthier workers. "Don't bother to ask me," Bush said, adding that he would not tip his hand until he starts negotiating with Congress next year.

Bush declined to criticize Russian President Vladimir Putin ([news - web sites](#)) despite concerns that he has strengthened authoritarian controls and backtracked on post-Soviet democratic reforms. Bush said he has a good personal relationship with Putin and "I intend to keep it that way." The United States and Russia have disagreements, the president added, but he said the relationship is good.

The president also offered a warm testimonial for Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld in the face of spreading expressions of no-confidence by GOP senators. Rumsfeld appears "rough and gruff," Bush said, but "he's a good, decent man. He's a caring fellow."

For 53 minutes, Bush fielded questions on international and domestic affairs. It was his 17th formal news conference, held one day before he flies to the presidential retreat at Camp David for a vacation that will stretch into early next year and include a stay at his Texas ranch.

Bush spoke a day after the deadliest attacks in Iraq since July — killing at least 54 people in Najaf and at least 13 in Karbala — and six weeks before Iraqis vote for a transitional assembly that will choose a president and a government and draft a permanent constitution. American newspapers showed chilling pictures of rebels in the heart of Baghdad executing election workers in cold blood.

"And so the American people are taking a look at Iraq and wondering whether the Iraqis are eventually going to be able to fight off these bombers and killers," Bush said in perhaps his clearest expression of frustration with Iraqi forces. Bush's strategy calls for American troops to protect Iraq while local police and soldiers are trained to do the job themselves, eventually allowing the United States to withdraw.

"Now I would call the results mixed in terms of standing up Iraqi units who are willing to fight," Bush said in a candid assessment. "There have been some cases where, when the heat got on, they left the battlefield. That's unacceptable. Iraq will never secure itself if they have troops that, when the heat gets on, they leave the battlefield." What is needed, he said, is a better military command structure.

Polls show an erosion in Americans' confidence that a stable, democratic government will be established in Iraq. "Polls change. Polls go up, polls go down," Bush said.

He said he understands why Americans have doubts about Iraq's ability. "They're looking on your TV screen and seeing indiscriminate bombings, where thousands of innocent — or hundreds of innocent Iraqis are getting killed ..." But Bush said those pictures do not reflect that 15 of Iraq's 18 provinces are relatively stable and that small businesses are starting up. "Life is better now than it was under Saddam Hussein ([news - web sites](#))."

"But no question about it. The bombers are having an effect ... They're trying to shake the will of the Iraqi people and, frankly, trying to shake the will of the American people."

Bush warned that insurgents would try to delay Iraq's elections, scheduled for Jan. 30, and intimidate the people. "I certainly don't expect the process to be trouble-free," the president said. "Yet I am confident of the result. I'm confident that terrorists will fail, the elections will go forward and Iraq will be a democracy...." He said he could not predict when American forces could come home.

He renewed his warning to Syria and Iran against "meddling" in Iraq's political process. "I meant it. And hopefully those governments heard what I said," Bush said, without threatening any consequences.

The president expressed fresh hope for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, saying "we've got a good chance to get it done." He welcomed efforts by British Prime Minister Tony Blair ([news - web sites](#)) to go to the region this week and make plans for a conference to help develop a Palestinian state.

Bush said he favored diplomatic approaches — rather than regime changes — in Iran and North Korea ([news - web sites](#)), two nations that the United States have troubling nuclear programs. He said diplomacy "must be the first choice, always the first choice of an administration trying to solve an issue of ... nuclear



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 [Slideshow: President Bush](#)

armament."

On Capitol Hill, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., disputed Bush's assertion that Social Security is in crisis. She said the Congressional Budget Office ([news - web sites](#)) has concluded that Social Security is secure for nearly 50 years without any changes. She challenged Bush to give Congress "a clear and honest accounting of the difficult trade-offs among benefit cuts, tax increases and a massive escalation of record deficits."

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