

Bush urges Iraqi leaders to act quickly to form new government

Jennifer Loven
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TWENTYNINE PALMS, Calif. — President Bush on Sunday called Iraq's top leaders to congratulate them on breaking a political impasse and urge the quick formation of a coalition government.

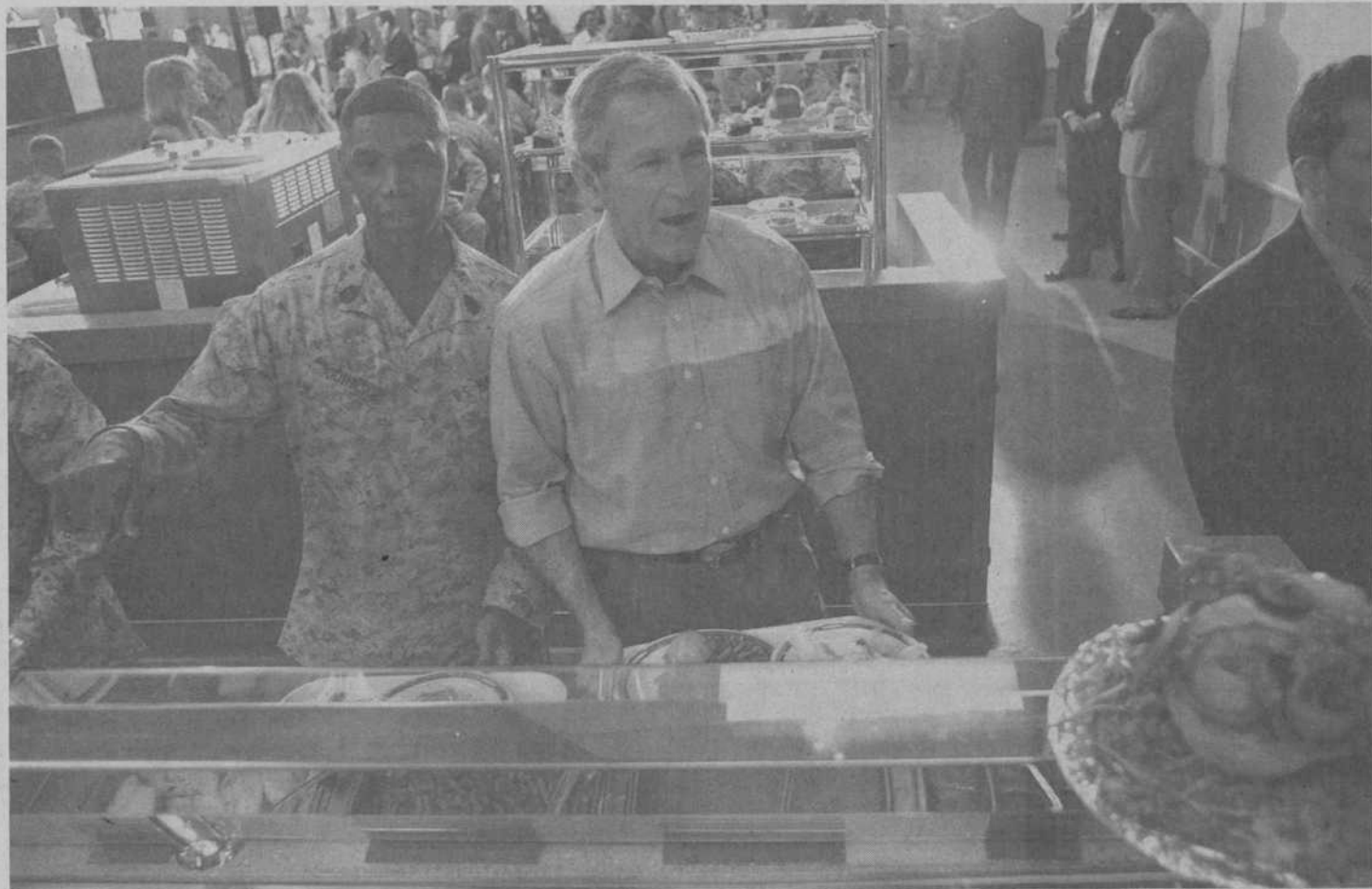
Bush said he told President Jalal Talabani, Prime Minister-designate Jawad al-Maliki and parliament Speaker Mahmoud al-Mashhadani that they have a duty to improve the lives of Iraqis, defeat the insurgency and unite the country.

"They have awesome responsibilities to their people," Bush told a few hundred Marines and their families after joining them for lunch in the mess hall at the Marine Corps Air Ground Center.

The Iraqi leaders "expressed their deep appreciation for the United States of America and our soldiers," Bush said, describing the three calls he made over about a half hour early Sunday.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan told reporters that Bush encouraged the Iraqi leaders, especially al-Maliki, to act quickly and pick a Cabinet.

The spokesman said



Gerald Herbert / The Associated Press

President Bush has lunch with Marine Corps and Navy families at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center in Twentynine Palms, Calif. on Sunday. At left is Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. William Johnson Jr.

Bush praised al-Maliki, a Shiite who was a consensus nominee for prime minister, for signaling he was prepared to crack down on Sunni insurgents and Shiite militias responsible for the increasing sectarian violence that has threatened to push

Iraq into civil war.

Bush also told al-Maliki he was encouraged by the Iraqi's pledge to select capable representatives for his Cabinet.

The president stood in the cafeteria line with Marines and loaded up a plate with

salad, green beans, mashed potatoes, meat and a roll. Speaking after the meal, he celebrated the political progress in Iraq. Al-Maliki was picked for the post on Saturday, ending months of political deadlock.

"Yesterday was an

important day, but I recognize that we still have more work to do," Bush said. "Democracy in Iraq will be a major blow to the terrorists who want to do us harm."

Bush spent about three hours at this military base

in the California desert. He was enthusiastically received in the mess hall and in the Protestant chapel, where he attended a contemporary morning church service complete with guitars, clapping and a slide show above the altar.

"Because of your service, we're defeating an enemy overseas so we do not have to face them here at home," Bush told the Marines, choking up as he heralded the sacrifices of them and their families. "These are historic times, and your service makes me incredibly proud."

The president started his day with an hour-long bike ride in the mountains near Rancho Mirage.

In the afternoon, he visited former President Ford at his home not far from the mountaintop luxury hotel where Bush was spending the weekend. Ford, 92, was hospitalized 12 days in January with pneumonia.

Bush also invited a small group of mayors and other government officials from around California for a private dinner at his hotel.

He plans to attend an immigration event in southern California and a congressional fundraiser in Las Vegas on Monday before returning to Washington.

Amid legal chaos, Duke lacrosse program faces uncertain future

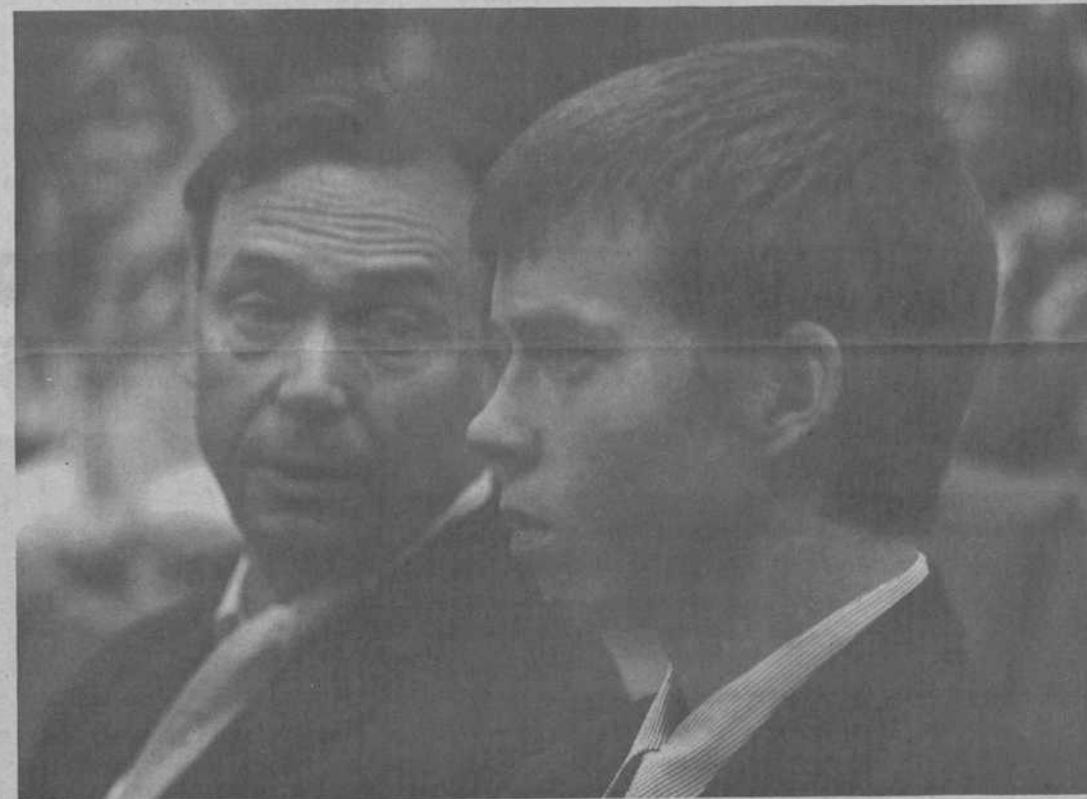
Aaron Beard
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DURHAM, N.C. — The Duke men's lacrosse team lost by a goal in last year's NCAA title game, falling to a school that's won eight national championships. The Blue Devils were a favorite to get back to this year's title game, and appeared ready to become one of the sport's elite programs.

Now, a month after a stripper told police she was raped at a team party, a promising season is over, the team's veteran coach is out of a job and two players face criminal indictments. Meanwhile, in the background of intense media scrutiny, a university law professor is leading an investigation that some fear will end with Duke shelving men's lacrosse.

"It has seemed premature to announce, and especially while indictments are still not only out but where there might be more coming, ... what the fate of the team will be," Duke President Richard Brodhead said. "Of course, this is a matter that will be given the gravest consideration at the appropriate time."

The Blue Devils went 21-22 from 2002-04, but reached the title game last year by winning an NCAA-record 17 games. Many expected the success to continue under 16th-year coach Mike Pressler, and an impressive recruiting



Sara D. Davis / The Associated Press

Duke lacrosse player Collin Finnerty, right, sits next to his father Kevin Finnerty while he waits for his first court appearance in the Durham County Judicial Building on Tuesday in Durham, N.C. Finnerty was arrested early Tuesday on charges of raping and kidnapping a stripper hired to dance at an off-campus party.

haul for next season had the program looking like one that reloads instead of rebuilds.

Robert Carpenter, who played for the Blue Devils under Pressler and started "Inside Lacrosse" magazine after graduating in 1996, said the sudden rise made Duke a hot program.

"A lacrosse coach can spend a lifetime trying to get to this seat that (Pressler) had been sitting in when this happened," Carpenter said.

The Blue Devils were

6-2 when the team held a March 13 party at the off-campus house of three team captains.

Two exotic dancers were hired to perform, and one, a 27-year-old student at a nearby university, told police she was pulled into a bathroom at the house by three men and raped.

Duke initially suspended the team from play, and later canceled the season and accepted Pressler's resignation. Last week, a grand jury indicted players Reade Seligmann,

a sophomore from Essex Fells, N.J., and Collin Finnerty, a sophomore from Garden City, N.Y., with rape, kidnapping and sexual assault.

Defense attorneys have strongly proclaimed the players' innocence. District Attorney Mike Nifong said there is a third suspect, one he hopes to soon identify with certainty and charge.

Duke is hardly the first college sports program to deal with this kind of controversy. St. John's disbanded its men's lacrosse

team from 1996-2005, a decision that came five years after three players were acquitted of sexual assault charges.

At Colorado, a recruiting scandal helped lead to the December resignation of football coach Gary Barnett, as well as the departure of the university's president and athletic director. An investigation concluded drugs, alcohol and sex were used to entice recruits, while two women filed a lawsuit claiming they were sexually assaulted by football players at an off-campus party in December 2001. Police investigated, but no charges were filed.

"What Duke will find out is when your name gets dispersed, rightly or wrongly, it has the potential to affect everybody with a degree from that school," said David Plati, Colorado's sports information director for 22 years. "That's what we've kind of been digging out from here."

In Durham, lacrosse assistant coaches Jon Lantzy and Kevin Cassese are meeting with the team and maintaining contact with recruits in an effort to keep the program together. Both declined to speak with The Associated Press, as did Pressler and members of the 47-man team.

The school's investigation into the lacrosse program will focus on the behavior team outside of the rape allegations. A third of the

team's players have been cited for public intoxication and public urination, and Finnerty was charged last year with simple assault in Washington, D.C.

In an interview with The Herald-Sun of Durham, athletic director Joe Alleva said he told Pressler the team was under the microscope and "he had to do everything he could to get them in line." When the AP asked to speak Alleva for this story, Duke officials referred questions to other members of the athletic department.

Duke has yet to start searching for a new coach and it's unclear how many current players and incoming recruits will remain. Duke spokesman Art Chase said the school is allowing players and recruits to contact other schools.

"I don't get the sense that people are thinking we're not going to have a team next year," Chase said. "But at the end of the day, we don't know what will happen."

Johns Hopkins has already received inquiries from a few Duke players and a recruit, spokesman Ernie Larossa said.

Syracuse coach John Desko told The Syracuse Post Standard that Duke sophomore Zack Greer — who led the country with 57 goals last season — is seeking a release from Duke. But he won't be joining the Orange.

U.S., Japan reach agreement on troop repositioning

Foster Hlug
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The United States and Japan have struck a bargain over a plan to realign U.S. forces in Japan, with Japan agreeing to pay \$6.1 billion of the estimated \$10 billion cost, the Japanese defense chief said Sunday night.

Japanese Defense Minister Fukushima Nukaga told reporters after his three-hour meeting

with Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld that Japan wanted to have an appropriate sharing of costs in transferring 8,000 Marines from Okinawa to the Pacific island of Guam.

Japan has offered to pay \$2.8 billion and the rest of its \$6.1 billion share will be in loans. Japan would shoulder 59 percent of the realignment cost.

Nukaga said both sides agreed that the Japan-U.S. alliance is important, not

only for Japan but also for the region.

The United States had proposed in an earlier round of negotiations that Japan pay \$7.5 billion, or 75 percent, of the cost to relocate Marines.

Japan had said it would pay about one-third of that amount.

The United States and Japan are discussing the biggest restructuring and streamlining of the U.S. military based in Japan in

decades.

An outline of the overall realignment plan was announced in October and was to be finalized by the end of March. However, it bogged down over details.

Under a mutual security pact, the United States has about 50,000 troops stationed in Japan.

The presence includes more than 10,000 Marines, several air bases and the home port for the Navy's 7th Fleet.

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