

Bush defends tax cuts against Democrats' jabs

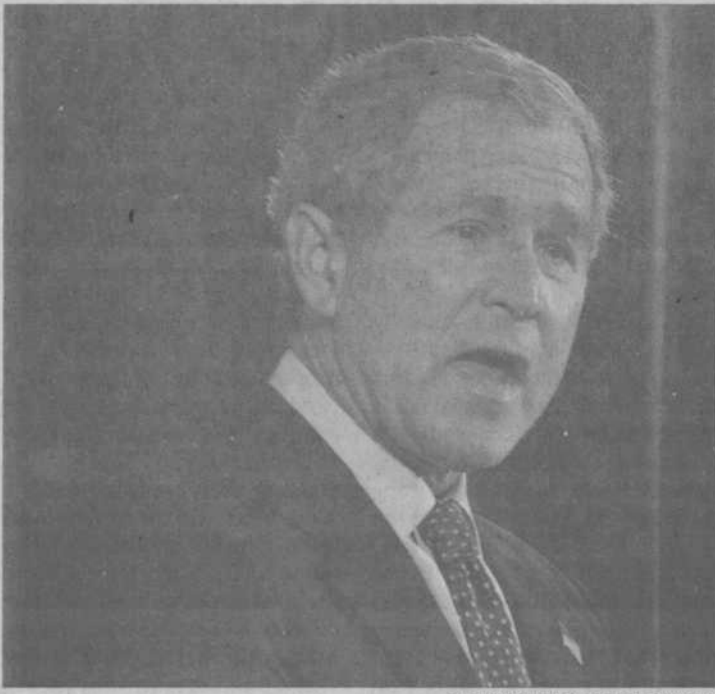


PHOTO COURTESY OF KRT CAMPUS

President George W. Bush outlines an immigration reform proposal in the East Room of the White House Wednesday.

BY SCOTT LINDLAW
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CRAWFORD, TEXAS — President Bush took a swipe at Democratic candidates who want to roll back the tax cuts he enacted, declaring Saturday the reductions have fueled a broad economic recovery.

In his weekly radio address, Bush cited a litany of improving economic figures: rising home ownership, business investment, manufacturing and stock market wealth.

He gave credit to the three tax cuts, totaling \$1.7 trillion over 10 years, that he pushed through Congress.

"Tax relief has got this economy going again, and tax relief will keep it moving forward," Bush said.

"We can continue on the path to prosperity and new jobs — a path marked by a pro-growth agenda that has cut taxes on paychecks for 109 million American

taxpayers — or we can reverse the course by raising taxes on hard-working Americans," Bush said. "The choice is clear."

The president focused on tax cuts at the end of a week when the issue took center stage in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Howard Dean and Dick Gephardt say they would erase all of Bush's tax cuts if elected, although Dean hinted this week he was considering a new proposal to reduce the tax burden on the middle class.

Another Democratic candidate, John Kerry, argues Bush's tax cuts targeted to the wealthy should be repealed. Kerry said in a campaign ad that began airing Friday, "It's right to roll back the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy and invest in our kids."

In a response to Bush's radio address, Kerry cited a critical new account of Bush's economic policies by Bush's former Treasury

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GEORGE W. BUSH
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

secretary, Paul O'Neill.

In O'Neill's version of events, related in a new book, "The Price of Loyalty," President Bush was so disengaged during Cabinet meetings that he was like a "blind man in a roomful of deaf people."

"In his radio address President Bush had the audacity to tell the nation that his tax cuts for the wealthy 'got this economy going again.' It's just more proof that President Bush's former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill was right,"

Kerry said in a statement released in Des Moines, Iowa, where he was campaigning.

The exchange is certain to preview a central debate in the election: whether Bush's tax cuts helped power an economic recovery or were simply a budget-busting boon for the rich.

Bush said he would renew his request that Congress make all his tax cuts permanent. Some of those cuts came with built-in expiration dates.

"Now is not the time to turn our backs on America's families and workers and entrepreneurs by letting much-needed tax relief expire," Bush said.

Bush's radio address aired as he spent a long weekend on his central Texas ranch. He returned there Friday afternoon, less than a week after finishing a nine-day vacation on the ranch.

Bush flies to Monterrey, Mexico, for a summit of Western Hemisphere leaders on Monday.

Israel's peace talks with Syria ended because of terrorist links

BY RAVI NESSMAN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

JERUSALEM — Israel had secret contacts with Syria several months ago — well before recent Syrian overtures — but they broke down after word of the meetings leaked out, Israel's foreign minister said Sunday.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said he was ready to open negotiations if Syria "stops helping terror."

The secret meetings appeared part of an effort to restart peace talks between Israel and one of its most intractable enemies. Earlier talks broke down in 2000.

Syrian President Bashar Assad called last month for a resumption of official talks, but Israel leaders are split over whether to take up his offer.

Sharon said Sunday that Israel would readily restart negotiations with Syria once Syria stopped aid-

ing and harboring terrorist groups that continue to attack Israel. The main Palestinian militant groups, as well as the Lebanese group Hezbollah, all operate on Syrian territory.

"Israel is ready and willing to negotiate once Syria, of course, stops helping terror," he told a news conference for foreign journalists.

Meanwhile, more than 80,000 Jewish settlers and their supporters demonstrated against Sharon's recent statements that Israel would unilaterally remove some settlements from the West Bank and Gaza if no peace deal with the Palestinians is reached soon.

"The uprooting of settlements tears the nation," read one protester's sign. "Sharon, resign — we don't want you any more," read another.

While peace efforts with the Palestinians remain stalled,

Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom and some other officials have been publicly pushing the government to accept Syria's offer to restart talks.

Shalom said Sunday that Israel had secret meetings seven or eight months ago with people "very close" to Assad.

"Unfortunately, after two meetings that the Israeli partners had with their Syrian colleagues, it leaked out. And while it was exposed, of course the Syrians didn't continue to negotiate through this track," he said.

Shalom said he had requested an investigation into the leaks, which he said have severely damaged Israel's ability to negotiate with its Arab neighbors.

In Damascus, an official with the information ministry denied there had been any secret contacts. The official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Syria's policy remains linked to interna-

tional initiatives that call on Israel to withdraw from all occupied territories and blamed Israel for the current stalemate.

Mahdi Dakhlallah, editor in chief of the Al-Baath newspaper of the ruling Baath party, said Syria has repeatedly insisted it would not "do anything under the table. Rather, it puts all its papers on the table."

"There is no need (for Syria) to hold secret contacts at all," he added.

Syria and Israel were close to a peace agreement in 2000, with Israel offering to return nearly all of the Golan Heights, a strategic plateau captured in the 1967 Mideast war. But the two sides were unable to finalize the deal.

Back channel talks with other unidentified Arab countries are continuing, Shalom added. His comments followed reports that Israel had held secret meetings with Libya.

"I don't see how we can contin-

ue to deal or to contact or to negotiate with our Arab neighbors while they are not sure that these contacts won't remain in secret," Shalom said.

Peace efforts with the Palestinians remain stalled after 39 months of violence and both sides' refusal to implement their obligations under the U.S.-backed "road map" peace plan.

Sharon said last month he would uproot some settlements and impose a boundary on the Palestinians if no peace deal is reached in the next few months. Last week he told activists from his Likud Party that under any peace deal, some settlements would have to be moved.

Thousands of settlers and their supporters gathered in Tel Aviv to protest Sharon's remarks.

Though police estimated that 120,000 people were at the rally, many appeared to be teenagers, too young to vote.

"I came to voice my opposition to Sharon's policies," said 18-year-old Matan Bahat, from the Israeli city of Holon. "I am against evacuating settlements, which would be a reward for terror."

Also Sunday, violence continued in the West Bank.

A 16-year-old Palestinian boy was killed in a confrontation with the Israeli army in a West Bank village. Palestinian witnesses said soldiers fired at Palestinian stone-throwers, while the military said the teen was about to throw a firebomb when he was shot.

A Palestinian man was killed when a bomb he was carrying exploded prematurely. The Israeli military said the bomber, identified by relatives as Iyad al-Masri, 19, from the West Bank city of Nablus, apparently had been en route to Israel. His brother and a cousin were killed by the Israeli army in clashes last week.

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