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Kerry: “If anyone owes our troops in the fields an apology, it is the President”

Transcript of John Kerry Responding to Attacks on his Remarks

Today in a press conference in Seattle, Washington, John Kerry responded to Republican attacks and partisan efforts to distort his botched George Bush joke.

Below is a transcript of Kerry’s remarks, as delivered:

SENATOR KERRY: Let me make it crystal clear, as crystal clear as I know how: I apologize to no one for my criticism of the president and of his broken policy.

If anyone owes our troops in the fields an apology, it is the President and his failed team and a Republican majority in the Congress that has been willing to stamp -- rubber-stamp policies that have done injury to our troops and to their families.

My statement yesterday -- and the White House knows this full well -- was a botched joke about the president and the president's people, not about the troops.

The White House's attempt to distort my true statement is a remarkable testament to their abject failure in making America safe. It's a stunning statement about their willingness to reduce anything in America to raw politics. It's their willingness to distort, their willingness to mislead Americans, their willingness to exploit the troops, as they have so many times at backdrops, at so many speeches at which they have not told the American people the truth.

I'm not going to stand for it.

What our troops deserve is a winning strategy. And what they deserve is leadership that is up to the sacrifice that they're making.

Sadly, this is the best that this administration can do in a month when we have lost 100 young men and women who have given their lives for a failed policy.

Over half the names on the Vietnam wall were put there after our leaders knew that our policy was wrong. And it was wrong that leaders were quiet then, and I'm not going to be quiet now.

This is a textbook Republican campaign strategy: Try to change the topic; try to make someone else the issue; try to make something else said the issue, not the policy, not their responsibility.

Well, everybody knows it's not working this time, and I'm not going to stand around and let it work. If anyone thinks that a veteran, someone like me, who's been fighting my entire career to provide for veterans, to fight for their benefits, to help honor what their service is, if anybody thinks that a veteran would somehow criticize more than 140,000 troops serving in Iraq and not the president and his people who put them there, they're crazy.

It's just wrong. This is a classic GOP textbook Republican campaign tactic.

I'm sick and tired of a bunch of despicable Republicans who will not debate real policy, who won't take responsibility for their own mistakes, standing up and trying to make other people the butt of those mistakes.

I'm sick and tired of a whole bunch of Republican attacks, most of which come from people who never wore the uniform and never had the courage to stand up and go to war themselves.

Enough is enough. We're not going to stand for this. This policy is broken. And this president and his administration didn't do their homework. They didn't study what would happen in Iraq. They didn't study and listen to the people who were the experts and would have told them.

And they know that's what I was talking about yesterday. I'm not going to be lectured by a White House or by the likes of Rush Limbaugh who's taking a day off from mimicking and attacking Michael J. Fox, who's now going to try to attack me and lie about me and distort me.

No way. It disgusts me that a bunch of these Republican hacks who've never worn the uniform of our country are willing to lie about those who did.

It's over.

This administration has given us a Katrina foreign policy: mistake upon mistake upon mistake; unwilling to give our troops the armor that they need; unwilling to have enough troops in place; unwilling to give them the Humvees that they deserve to protect them;

unwilling to have a coalition that is adequate to be able to defend our interests.

Our own intelligence agency has told us they're creating more terrorists, not less. They're making us less safe, not more.

I think Americans are sick and tired of this game. These Republicans are afraid to stand up and debate a real veteran on this topic. And they're afraid to debate -- you know, they want to debate straw men because they're afraid to debate real men.

Well, we're going to have a real debate in this country about this policy. The bottom line is: These Republicans want to distort this policy. And, this time, it won't work because we are going to stay in their face with the truth.

And no Democrat is going to be bullied by these people, by these kinds of attacks that have no place in American politics. It's time to set our policy correct.

They have a stand-still-and-lose policy in Iraq and they have a cut-and-run policy in Afghanistan. And the fact is, our troops, who have served heroically, who deserve better, deserve leadership that is up to their sacrifice, period.

QUESTION: Senator, John McCain said that you owe an apology to the many thousands of Americans serving in Iraq, who answered this country's call because they are patriots.

To those people who didn't get your joke, who may have misinterpreted you as saying the undereducated are cannon fodder, what do you say?

KERRY: I never said that, and John McCain knows I've never said that and John McCain knows I wouldn't say that.

And John McCain ought to ask for an apology from Donald Rumsfeld for making the mistakes he's made. John McCain ought to ask for an apology from this administration for not sending in enough troops.

He ought to ask for an apology for putting our troops on the line with a policy that doesn't have an adequate coalition, that doesn't have adequate diplomacy, where we don't have a strategy to win.

And what we need is to debate the real issues, not these phony, sideline issues that are part of the politics. Americans are tired -- sick and tired of this kind of politics.

They know my true feelings. They know I fought to provide additional money for veterans. They know I fought to provide money for combat for veterans. They know I've fought to put money for V.A. They know I've honored those veterans.

They know that this is the finest military -- and I've said it 100,000 times -- that we've ever had. They know precisely what I was saying.

And they're trying to turn this because they have a bankrupt policy and they can't defend it to the nation and they can't defend it to the world.

KERRY: And I'm not going to stand for this anymore; period. That's the apology that people ought to get.

QUESTION: Do you need to go to joke school?

KERRY: Sure.

QUESTION: Senator, do you regret saying the remark? And what were you trying to say?

KERRY: Very simple: that those who didn't study it properly, those who made the decisions, they got us into Iraq. Very simple.

The fact is they know that. The administration knows that. And they're simply trying to distort this. They're trying to play a game.

And, again, I'm not going to stand for it. This is the kind of thing that makes Americans sick. People know -- I mean, there ought to be some level of honor and trust in this process.

I have fought a lifetime on behalf of veterans. We have the finest young men and women serving us in the United States military that we've ever had, and I'm proud of that.

But this administration has let them down, and that was clearly a remark directed at this administration. They understand it. They want to distort it. It's a classic Republican playbook. They want to change the topic.

We're not going to let them change the topic. The topic is their failed policy in Iraq. The topic is that they don't have a strategy, they don't have a way to be able to win.

You got Dick Cheney saying everything's just terrific in Iraq only a week ago. John McCain ought to ask for an apology from Dick Cheney for misleading America. He ought to ask for an apology from the president for lying about the nuclear program in Africa. He ought to ask for an apology for once again a week ago referring to Al Qaida as being the central problem in Iraq, when Al Qaida is not the central problem.

Enough is enough. I'm not going to stand for these people trying to shift the topic and make it politics. America deserves a real discussion about real policy. And that's what this election is going to be about next Tuesday.

One more question, then I got to run.

QUESTION: (OFF-MIKE)

KERRY: Let me tell you something: I'm not going to give them one ounce of daylight to spread one of their lies and to play this game ever, ever again. That is a lesson I learned deep and hard.

And I'll tell you: I will stand up anywhere across this country and take these guys on. This is dishonoring not just the troops themselves by pointing the finger at the troops, it's abusing the troops. They're using the troops. They're trying to make the troops into the target here. I didn't do that, and they know that.

KERRY: And for them to suggest that somebody who served their country, as I did, and has a record like I have in the United States Congress of standing up and fighting for the troops would ever, ever insult the troops is an insult in and of itself.

And they owe us an apology for even daring to use the White House to stand up and make this an issue again. Shame on them. Shame on them.

And may the American people take that shame to the polls with them next Tuesday.

Thank you all.

QUESTION: What do you say to the men and women fighting in Iraq if they hear this in passing, that may be confused on the issue, sir?

KERRY: They will hear what I just said. I honor their service, and I always have.

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