

SAN DIEGO (May 2) - Juggling national and economic security, President Bush huddled with battle commanders on Friday aboard a homebound U.S. aircraft carrier before heading to shore where he turned his focus to the domestic politics of tax cuts.

In what was essentially the last stride of a victory lap, Bush spent the night off the California coast on the USS Abraham Lincoln on which he declared major combat in Iraq over.

Bush was out on the flight deck of the carrier at 5:55 a.m. PDT, where he "took in the scene, breathed the morning air and watched two (F-18) Hornets take off," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said.

Sailors dressed in their summer whites lined part of the deck to see Bush off. From San Diego, he was headed to Santa Clara, California, to focus on his other priority -- reviving the sluggish U.S. economy.

Fleischer said the latest jump in the U.S. unemployment rate -- to a four-month high of 6 percent in April -- was a "source of concern" and provided further impetus for Congress to pass the president's tax cut package.

In his televised address to the nation on Thursday from the deck of the carrier Bush sought to bring closure to the fighting in Iraq but underscored that much remains to be done to combat global terrorism.

The announcement gave Bush greater political leeway to promote his tax-cutting economic program, which he aims to do by stepping up travel across the country in coming weeks as well as to prepare for his 2004 reelection campaign.

Fleischer said the administration clearly was "entering a new phase internationally."

"This president will continue to focus his efforts on those two priorities, because the war on terror remains an important national priority to protect our country and protect our people," he said. "Economic security is also at the heart and soul of what he is working on."

Republicans saw political advantage in Bush delivering the speech from the Lincoln, rather than in Washington.

"It's a political trifecta. It's out of Washington, it's in the military and it's off the coast of the Golden State," said Republican consultant Scott Reed.

California's 54 electoral votes have gone Democratic in recent presidential elections, but Republicans are loathe to concede the giant state.

Fleischer shot back at some Democrats who criticized Bush's appearance on the carrier as politically motivated. "This is not about the president, this is about saying 'thank you' to the men and women who won the war," he said.

#### PUSH FOR TAX CUTS

After breakfast with commanders and senior officers aboard the Lincoln as it approached the West coast, Bush flew by helicopter to San Diego and then aboard Air Force One to Santa Clara in Silicon Valley to talk about his push for \$550 billion in tax cuts.

Before the speech, he will visit a United Defense Industries plant that makes the Bradley fighting vehicle, a war horse of U.S. military forces.

After his Santa Clara speech, Bush will meet with Australian Prime Minister John Howard, one of his staunchest allies in the Iraq war. The two will travel together aboard Air Force One to the president's ranch in Crawford, Texas, for talks on Friday night and Saturday.