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BUSH SURPRISES TOP ADVISERS WITH MEDALS AT GULF WAR CEREMONY

By Gene Gibbons

WASHINGTON, July 3, Reuter - President George Bush on Wednesday presented prestigious medals to his top Gulf War generals and advisers and then travelled to America's heartland for patriotic festivities to mark the rout of Iraq and the U.S. Independence Day holiday.

At a glittering White House awards ceremony attended by ambassadors from several countries that sent troops to the Gulf, Bush first gave the Presidential Medal of Freedom to generals Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell.

Mrs Bush helped with the presentations, borrowing her husband's eyeglasses to see better as she fastened the gold, blue and white decorations on the two military officers.

Schwarzkopf was the senior allied commander in the Gulf while Powell managed the overall war effort from the Pentagon in his role as chairman of the military Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Bush then called forward the leading civilian architects of the war -- Secretary of State James Baker, Defence Secretary Dick Cheney and National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft -- to receive the highest U.S. civilian honours. Their awards had not been announced in advance.

"Tomorrow, all across this country, Americans will celebrate the birth of our nation," Bush said, referring to the July 4 Independence Day holiday. "It will be a great Fourth of July but I think this year these festivities take on a very special significance as we properly celebrate the safe return of our sons and daughters from the Gulf and honour those who have fallen in the cause of freedom."

A total of 376 U.S. military personnel were killed in the Gulf and 147 of them died in combat to free Kuwait from Iraqi occupation.

Bush said the 42-day war, which ended in a 100-hour ground campaign that smashed Iraqi forces, was "another turning point in America's destiny" because it restored U.S. credibility and self-confidence.

"The young men and women we welcome home from the Gulf return to a nation far different from the one they left. They come home to a country that is confident and proud, an America that is sure of itself and strong, an America other nations look to for leadership," he said.

Not mentioned during the ceremony was a new confrontation

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with Baghdad over its refusal to give U.N. inspectors unfettered access to suspected Iraqi nuclear sites. U.S. officials say there is a strong possibility of U.S. military action if that situation is not resolved on U.N. terms.

Bush, who was to attend Desert Storm welcoming ceremonies in Missouri and Michigan on Thursday, said that while the troops were the heroes of the war, it was fitting to recognise "special service that was rendered by a special few."

Bush honoured eight officials who had important but largely unpublicised roles with Presidential Citizen's Medals. They were Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, Deputy Secretary of Defence Donald Atwood, Deputy CIA Director Richard Kerr, Deputy National Security Adviser Robert Gates, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Robert Kimmitt, Undersecretary of Defence for Policy Paul Wolfowitz, Admiral David Jeremiah, the vice chairman of the military chiefs of staff, and National Security Council staffer Richard Haass. REUTER GG GS LD