

Interview With European Journalists November 18, 2002

The President. So here's what we're going to do. I'll say a few comments, and we'll kind of do the loop until we run out of time.

First, I'm really looking forward to this trip. I think it's going to be historic. You'll ask me who I'm voting for, for expansion; I'm not going to tell you. You'll find out on Thursday. I say that because that's what we've all agreed to.

But if you're interested in knowing my philosophy toward the Prague summit, then you need only look as far as the speech I gave in Warsaw, Poland, that talked about a Europe whole, free, and at peace. I believe NATO expansion—and in that speech, you'd see that I talked about NATO expansion as good for America, because a Europe whole, free, and at peace is good for America.

I am—believe in the spirit of the countries that we're talking about. I believe in their spirit. These are countries that have lived under totalitarianism, and they understand the value of freedom. And they love freedom, and I love that spirit. I think that's going to be a very important part of invigorating the Alliance.

The Alliance is a crucial alliance. It's a strong alliance. We're going into a new period. And the idea of having members that are willing to shoulder their share of the burden of keeping the peace with the new threats is good, but—and this spirit of understanding what totalitarianism can mean and understanding the responsibilities of being free nations—that come with being a free nation is very important at this summit.

So I'm really looking forward to it. It's—I'm excited to go to countries that have invited me to come. I look forward to the events. And so, with that, I'll answer some questions. Why don't we start here? You are from?

President's Upcoming Visit to Romania

Q. Yes, sir. I am from Romania.

The President. That's good.

Q. Sir, the Romanian people waited for the Americans after the World War II. We've waited for you almost 60 years. You know, the farmers were raising the corn in such a way that the American planes could land. That happened in '45 and the fifties. Now, for my parents, it might be a little bit late, but for my 11-years daughter, it might have a chance. You're coming to Bucharest next Saturday. This time are the Americans really coming to Romania?

The President. Great question. No more Munichs. No more Yaltas. America—I come to your country because I believe that Romania is an important part of a Europe which is whole and free and at peace. The story of Romania is a powerful story, of people taking charge of their own lives, of—

[*At this point, a tape recorder stopped.*]

The President. We had a click here, in case anybody is interested. This one right here. Poor planning? [*Laughter*] Nobody claims it? Shouldn't have said poor planning. This is nobody's?

Q. Might be mine.

The President. It's yours?

Q. Yes. If it's out, it's out. That's okay. [*Laughter*]

The President. You don't want—if you've got to, turn it over. Getting quite articulate there. [*Laughter*]

A lot of us watched the story of your country ridding yourselves of a totalitarian dictator, and it was a powerful story. But the story didn't end there. The story ended with a desire for freedom and democracy and open markets.

And the answer to your question is, absolutely. That's what the whole Prague summit is about: All for one, and one for all.

We remember here in our country when, after the attacks of September the 11th, NATO stood up and said, "An attack on the United States is an attack on us." I will say the same thing about Romania and Lithuania and the Czech Republic and anybody else that might be a member of NATO. And that's what I feel.

I appreciate that question. That's—your question is one of the reasons I look so forward to going to Romania—

Q. Thank you, sir.

The President. —to be able to provide that assurance in what is going to be a, as I understand it, magnificent event where, on the one hand, I will be able to point to statues of heroic liberators, people who believed in freedom, that freedom was ingrained in their soul, and on the other hand, point to a balcony where the dictator had his—he realized reality. It's—as a matter of fact, I was looking at my speech last night.

End of the Cold War

Q. I'm from Lithuania, and Lithuania was recognized 11 years ago by your father, President Bush—

The President. Forty-one, we call him.

Q. —who took an active role in managing the collapse of the Soviet Union. How do you recall these times?

The President. Yes. Well, first, I want—I remember that, in terms of the Baltic states, that our country always viewed the Baltics as independent. During the Soviet era, we viewed the Baltics as independent. Secondly, I recall the times leading up to the collapse of the Soviet leadership, not only with my dad's actions as President but those of Ronald Reagan as well, where there was clarity of thought, that there was no equivocation when it came to issues such as freedom.

And I keep saying that word because it is an issue that we face collectively today in other parts of the world. Freedom is essentially a human condition. It's not an American gift. It is God's gift to the world.

I believe that. I believe that everybody—the Almighty recognizes, through His mercy and grace, that people are—the freedom of each individual. Everybody counts. Everybody is precious.

It was exciting times for Americans to watch the change in the Soviet Union, because it meant that the days of significant animosity could be ending. A lot of us grew up when the two big countries were fierce enemies, and the rest of the world watched to see whether or not there would be war and watched many times in horror as to whether or not there would be war, because the consequences of war between the Soviet Union and America would have been devastating for a lot of people. It looked like that, to us, that the collapse of the Soviet Union would provide an opportunity for peace. That's the most significant—that's the most exciting thing for me, that the relationship would be changed.

I'm honored to be in a position to help further the change of the relationship. I'll answer the Russian journalist's question in a minute—I'm not going to anticipate it—but I am going, after Prague, immediately to Russia for a reason.

And anyway, it was exciting times for us. But the exciting—the true excitement is going to come when the people of the Baltics realize the world has changed dramatically, and it finally has changed dramatically in many ways, that Russia is not an enemy, that the United States is not an enemy of Russia, that the United States is still a friend of the Baltics. But most importantly, the Baltic people have got an opportunity now to realize their full potential. And that was what was 11 years ago we first saw, and it's an honor to be a continuing part of that history.

Yes, sir.

Chechnya/War on Terror

Q. Mr. President, I would like to ask you a question regarding Chechnya.

The President. Sure.

Q. I guess it will be one of the topics you will discuss with Mr. Putin—

The President. Absolutely.

Q. Do you believe that after the latest events—mainly, after hostage in Moscow and after the statements made by Usama bin Laden raising the terrorist acts in Bali and Moscow, do you believe, Mr. President, that you can understand better this red—terrorists pose to Russia? And would you agree—would you agree with President Putin, who says that the Chechen kind of terrorism vis-a-vis Russia is of the same nature as the Al Qaida terrorism to the United States?

The President. Right. You didn't ask the question I thought you were going to ask. I'm going to Russia to make it clear to the Russians and to Vladimir Putin, they have nothing to fear from NATO expansion, that a Baltic—the Baltics in NATO are positive for Russia.

Now, my answer to your question—I thought you were going to ask why I'm going to St. Petersburg. Anyway—[laughter]—and I'm going—I didn't hesitate when Vladimir and I talked about my trip to St. Petersburg, that it was very important for me to go there. And it was important for me say—explain why I think it's a positive development.

Terrorism—first of all, I've got a good friend in the fight against terrorism in Vladimir Putin. He understands the stakes, MDNM and so do I. He understands that as you embrace freedom and embrace change and—that there will be people who resent that and want to impose their will.

Secondly, I thought that at the theater that he was confronted with a very difficult situation. Eight hundred people were—were going to lose their lives. Clearly, these people were killers, just like the killers that came to America. There's a common—a common thread, that anytime anybody is willing to take innocent life for a so-called cause, they must be dealt with. And he made some very tough decisions. And people tried to blame Vladimir; they ought to

blame the terrorists. They're the ones who caused the situation, not President Putin.

Thirdly, I believe Chechnya can—I hope that Chechnya can be solved peacefully, that there's ways to discuss the political dialog in such a way that this issue can be solved peacefully. Thirdly, to the extent that there are Al Qaida members infiltrating Russia, they need to be dealt with; they need to be brought to justice. And I—you know, when Usama, praising these—the Muslim attacks in Chechnya, it's clear that there is an Al Qaida interest.

That's why we're working so hard in Georgia with the Georgians to, one, encourage a dialog between Shevardnadze and President Putin, and two, develop a joint strategy to deal with the Al Qaida members which may be in the Pankisi Gorge. And so—but I will continue to talk to Vladimir about the need to protect and recognize the rights of minorities within any country and at the same time deal with terrorism. And I hope he can find that balance. I think he can.

Czech Republic and NATO

Q. Mr. President, how do you assess the performance of the Czech Republic in NATO in preparation for this summit?

The President. Yes, well, first of all, they've been valuable members of NATO. I was able to express that to your President in his recent visit—who, by the way, is an outstanding human being and is highly respected and highly regarded in all of America. NATO has been—I mean, the Czech Republic has been a—was unhesitating in its support of Article 5 in NATO, for which I am grateful. Every conversation I've had with the President, he has been nothing more than anxious for the Czech Republic to perform its role within NATO.

The interesting thing—let me give you kind of a broader statement about what you'll see at the Prague summit—is that everybody has got something to contribute in the military capacities of NATO to deal

with the new threats. And the Czech Republic certainly is such a country. There's going to be—I guess, the best word will be specialization—there needs to be a specialization as we develop the military capacity to deal with the true threat.

Russia is not a threat, and therefore, the military strategies of NATO need to be changed to recognize that new reality. Russia is—Russia is a friend, not an enemy. NATO was formed because of the Warsaw Pact. The Warsaw Pact doesn't exist and, therefore, now—but there is a threat to all of us. And that is the threat in the form of international and global terrorism, which we must be able to deal with. The Czech Republic understands that. They're willing to help specialize. And it's up to the Czech Republic to determine that—along with Lord Robertson and his strategy—to determine how best to meet with the threats we face.

Obviously, we've had good relations with the intelligence service of the Czech Republic, which is one of the key ingredients in order to fight terror. If you know somebody is thinking about doing something to us or we know somebody is thinking about doing something to you, we share intelligence. We've got good intelligence-sharing with Russia, by the way, now, because of the joint threat of global terror.

It's a key ingredient in order to make sure we're able to find the new enemy. The enemy doesn't travel in army formations. They're killers. They take theaters. They crash airplanes into buildings. They bomb resorts. And we must know as much about their whereabouts and their plans as possible, in order to find them and bring them to justice. And therefore, there needs to be a different attitude about the threats we face.

In terms of the Prague summit, I am mindful of what happens when the U.S. President shows up at times. I mean, it is—you know, there is going to be a lot of noise and clamor. But I'm actually confident that the Czech Republic will do a

fine job. It is a big deal that this city of Prague hosts this, and nations from all over Europe coming and—plus the Canadians and ourselves. I'm sure there's going to be people who are willing to express their voices, that maybe perhaps think NATO—something about NATO is not the way they like it, or whatever it may be. We believe in free speech. Hopefully, they'll have an opportunity to speak freely in a way that's not—that doesn't promote violence.

But the thing that impresses me most about the Czech Republic and its Government is, in spite of the terrible flood, devastating floods, that this Government and these people are anxious to host this meeting and will be able to do so in a great way. And it shows the great character of the people, to rise above the devastation to be able to host this summit. So I'm really looking forward to it. I can't wait to get there and will be there soon.

Romania and NATO

Q. Mr. President, what symbol would you associate to Romania on the new NATO map? I mean, where is the place of Romania in this new NATO map?

The President. How do you mean, what's the place? What do you mean—well, first of all, you're getting me caught—if these countries get in—[laughter]. But the fact that I'm going to your country I guess says something. [Laughter]

Q. We hope so.

The President. Right now I'm off the record. Anyway—[laughter]—first of all, the map is more than just countries on a piece of paper; the map is an attitude. It's an attitude that says that we want to work toward open markets and open societies and transparency and fight corruption. We want to participate in the global war against terror in a way that we're capable of doing so.

Physically, of course, Romania will be the leading edge of Europe extending its reach into Eastern Europe. And it's a significant reach. It is—today, it's interesting, the Vice

President and I were being briefed on an issue, and we looked at the map, and the Vice President said, "I have trouble adjusting to the actual map of NATO." In other words, the point was that NATO now—NATO's reach is far east. And Romania represents that eastern reach. So physically it's a significant statement of the power of an alliance and the willingness of a people to adopt the habits necessary to have a free society.

It's—I think that's probably the most significant thing about the NATO map. It's an attitude. It's the soul of NATO, like I described earlier. But it's the presence of Romania—really recognizes the change. And it's a significant change. It's an historic—this will be an historic day, our meeting on one day—Thursday, I think is the day—in which the decision will be actually announced.

Lithuania

Q. Although—Mr. President, although, yes—recognize the annexation and occupation of Lithuanian, to most Americans our country was unknown territory for a long time. And can you recall, when did you first and what hear about Lithuania? And what did you think of Lithuania at that time? And what do you think now?

The President. Well, there's a lot of Lithuanian Americans who kept the hope alive of a free and independent Lithuania in America, not so much in my home State of Texas, mainly in the Midwest. And I think a lot of people took pity on the people of Lithuania, given the circumstances. And the Government took its position. But there was a patience by our leadership that eventually freedom would prevail.

Lithuania is kind of a—it's got kind of a—all the Baltics, for that matter—have got an interesting kind of romance because it's a small country. It's totally overwhelmed, divided up. It's kind of handed out as pieces of a—pieces of a settlement that saddened a lot of Americans. But nobody ever gave up hope, I think. Most Americans

never gave up hope that the Baltics would some day be able to realize their vast potential.

I'm going to tell you an interesting story. This is from another Baltic country. It's from the Prime Minister of Estonia, came to see me. I'm very hesitant to put words into another leader's mouth. They tend to do it to me, and I don't like it. So I would paraphrase, loosely paraphrase. He was there at the time when—and one of the things I do is welcome a lot of leaders to America; it's an interesting experience. I have done so with the Lithuanian leadership as well.

And I said—this is the day where I told our Congress we were going to encourage a national debate and dialog on Iraq. And I started to give him my rationale as to why I was thinking about Iraq. He said, "You don't need to talk to me"—this is paraphrasing now—about Iraq. He said, "Our country has watched democracies go soft in the face of totalitarianism, and we lived in slavery for 50 years."

Now, that's a paraphrase for the American press. But the point I want to make to you is that he was clear about obligations we have. That's what I think about the Baltics. The spirit—and Romania, for that matter, and the Czech Republic, as embodied in the works and thoughts of Vaclav Havel. That's what I think about your country. You know, I firmly believe that—again, I keep repeating myself, but it's on my mind because this is exactly what we're dealing with at the NATO expansion. And this is the concept of how precious freedom is for people. It is a—and it has a lot to do, frankly, with my thinking about Iraq too.

The fact that people are tortured and subjugated, aren't free to realize their potential, really bothers me. I think we have an obligation to work to free people. There's all kinds of ways to do it, but we have that obligation. It doesn't happen as quickly sometimes as we would like. But that's an obligation of all of us who have

got—who live in free countries. You have that obligation. But there's no doubt you'll recognize that obligation because you're freshly free from subjugation. And that's what I was talking about, about the invigoration of the soul of NATO. That's what I think about when I think about the Baltics.

United Nations Resolution on Iraq

Q. Mr. President, you mentioned Iraq.
The President. Yes.

Q. Do you think—do you believe that Russian support of the U.N. resolution on Iraq has promoted any kind of reconciliation between the position of Russia and America on this matter? And what would you like to tell to President Putin in regard to—

The President. Oh, yes. Well, first, I appreciate them working together with us on the resolution. The U.N. Security Council sent a clear signal to Iraq and the world. We expect them to disarm, is what the signal said. And actually, the U.N. Security Council sent a signal about themselves, that they want to be relevant.

You see, if you send out 16 resolutions and all 16 resolutions were ignored, at some point in time, somebody has got to tell the truth and say, "You're not relevant. Why pass a resolution unless you really mean it?" And so we got together, and we said, "Fine, let's pass this significant resolution." And the Russians were helpful and voted for it. And now the word is out, that the U.N. Security Council will be a relevant body. In other words, we intend to enforce the serious consequences if there's not disarmament, and that we're able to work with our friends. I thought that was a very positive thing.

And I will tell this to Vladimir Putin. It's probably better for me to tell him, but not through your newspapers, but I'll try anyway. The issue is not inspectors. The issue is disarmament. That's the issue. And the question is, will Saddam Hussein disarm? That's what the U.N. Security Council

has said, once again, with Russian support, along with other—a lot of other countries. And so he must show us whether or not he'll disarm, for the sake of peace.

And if he doesn't, then we, of course, will consult, like we said we would do—we'd hold a meeting. But the interesting thing about the U.N. Security Council resolution is, all countries are free to act. And that was explained to Vladimir what my sentiments—I'm very strong about. This is not a—this isn't a free pass for Saddam, now that the resolution has been passed. Quite the contrary. We expect him to disarm. And we expect him to do everything he can to disarm. And we expect him to be cooperating in his disarmament for the sake of peace.

And that's what the U.N. Security Council said to me, that people now have finally come to the conclusion that it's time now to deal with the issue. Hopefully, this can get done peacefully. But it's up to Mr. Saddam Hussein, and we'll see. It's time for him to declare if he's got any weapons. And we'll proceed from there.

NATO and Iraq

Q. Mr. President, will you ask the allies in Prague to contribute to military action if such action becomes necessary?

The President. I will—first of all, I believe that the NATO Alliance understands the issue. The countries there would like to see a disarmed Saddam Hussein. They—a peaceful country, they believe in peace, just like I believe in peace. And a Saddam Hussein with weapons of mass destruction is—particularly since he's used them in the past, and he clearly can't stand America and many of our friends—would mean it would be likely for us not to have peace.

Imagine a Saddam Hussein with a nuclear weapon. It's certainly not an ingredient for peace, quite the contrary. And so the NATO countries understand that. And if, in fact, military action is needed, we'll consult with them, and everybody will be able to make a decision that they're

comfortable with. But I wouldn't preclude a peaceful settlement. I hope it happens peacefully. But if it doesn't, just—people will know that our intent is to lead a coalition of like-minded, freedom-loving countries, a coalition of the willing to disarm Saddam Hussein. And one way or the other, he's going to be disarmed, and it's in everybody's interest that that be the case.

So we'll talk about that. All right? Thank you for your time. Now, are you going on these trips? You're going to go to the NATO summit? That's going to be exciting. How many journalists will be there?

NATO Summit in Prague

Q. Two thousand seven hundred—that was the last figure I note from Prague before I came here.

The President. Two thousand seven hundred.

Q. Including TV crews.

The President. Wow. Well, I can't wait for my press conference. I'm going to have about a 2-hour press conference there in front of 2,700. [Laughter]

Q. Two days.

The President. Two days. [Laughter] Just kidding, Steve [Steve Holland, Reuters].

Q. Can't wait for that.

The President. You're going?

Q. Yes, sir.

The President. It's going to be exciting. It's going to be a very exciting time. And so you have just come from Prague?

Q. Yes.

The President. So you tell me what the feeling is like there in the city.

Q. Well, the city is almost evacuated, in expecting the summit, because—

The President. The city is evacuated?

Q. No, I'm joking, but the area around the conference center is almost evacuated. And the kids, they have holiday, and the shops are going to be closed, and the center of the city, Wenceslas Square where the demonstrations usually take place, is under police surveillance. So Prague is get-

ting ready, so everyone is expecting how to get to work in—they are making arrangements.

The President. Yes. And how many people are coming, just total? Do they have an estimate? From outside the Czech Republic.

Q. More than 2,000 people—I mean, delegations and—

The President. Oh, it's got to be way more than that.

Q. —with the staff and everything.

The President. Well, the press is 2,700 alone. I bet there's—our mighty delegation—[laughter].

Q. But only two hotels were affected by the floods. Only two of the number of the hotels that are ready for—to accommodate the delegations and—

The President. They're ready?

Q. —only two hotels were badly affected by the floods. Otherwise—

The President. How is the recovery from the floods?

Q. It was bad. It was tough, and now it's getting better. There are some neighborhoods in Prague where people cannot return to their homes because of the—

The President. Still?

Q. —and it's not only Prague. It's the whole country, going into Germany.

The President. So sad.

Q. So it's very bad. No chronicle—no person ever remembers such a disaster.

The President. It's a 500-year flood.

Q. A thousand.

The President. A 1,000-year flood. Wow, that's too bad.

Q. But as we say, Charles did it—from the 14th century. [Laughter]

President's Visits to Europe

The President. Well, I'm glad the country is recovering. We're really looking forward to it and looking forward to our trips, too. They're going to be magnificent.

Q. We expect more people than for the Pope in 1999.

The President. Really? It's going to be exciting. I'm looking forward to it. I better make sure my speech is—I think they'll like it.

All right. We'll see you there. Thanks. Thanks for coming. I'm looking forward to going to St. Petersburg again.

Q. Yes, sure. Thank you very much.

The President. The second time in one year. Maybe a third time.

Q. Did you like it?

The President. Yes, it was spectacular. Remember, we went out on the boat, Vladimir, myself, Sergey Ivanov, floated a—White Nights. Fantastic. It won't be White Nights this time, though. Will be white days, right, snowing?

Q. Yes, snowing. [Laughter]

The President. We'll see you all there. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 10:45 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House for later broadcast, and the transcript was embargoed for release by the Office of the Press Secretary until 6:30 p.m. In his remarks, the President referred to President Vladimir Putin of Russia; Usama bin Laden, leader of the Al Qaida terrorist organization; Prime Minister Siim Kallas of Estonia; President Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic; President Eduard Shevardnadze of the Republic of Georgia; Secretary General Lord Robertson of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; and Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Borisovich Ivanov. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Interview With Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty November 18, 2002

Coalition Against Iraq

Q. Mr. President, this week NATO will be celebrating an historic expansion as well as focusing on transforming the Alliance to meet new threats, such as Iraq. You have spoken about the possibility of leading a coalition of the willing against Iraq. Why not speak about using NATO forces against Iraq, since under NATO's charter all members are supposed to come to the aid of any member under direct threat?

The President. Well, first of all, I hope we can do this peacefully. And by doing it peacefully, that means I hope Saddam Hussein disarms. Of course, we've hoped that for 11 years. We've hoped that for 16 resolutions. We now have a 17th resolution, and this time I intend to work with nations that love freedom and peace, make sure the resolution stands. And if he doesn't disarm, you're right, I'll lead a coalition of the willing to disarm him. And

there's all kinds of ways for that coalition to be formed. It could be formed with NATO, if they choose. I have said to the U.N. Security Council, "We'll go back and discuss the matter with you." But Mr. Saddam Hussein must understand he'll be disarmed one way or the other. I hope it's done peacefully.

NATO and the War on Terror

Q. The new members of NATO are quite small. Do you see them as contributing something significant militarily to the Alliance?

The President. I was hoping you'd ask, do I see them contributing something to the Alliance, so I'm going to answer it that way. First, I'll answer it militarily, because I do believe they can contribute something really important, and that is, they can contribute their love for freedom. These are countries which have lived in totalitarian