

Interview With RTR TV of Russia

May 29, 2003

Strength of the Dollar

Q. Let me start with the people's question. In my country, for many people, America is associated first and foremost with the U.S. dollar. You bring the muscle. What's going on? Is it going to stay as weak as it is now? And what's your forecast?

The President. The policy of my administration is for there to be a strong U.S. dollar.

Q. Which is not at the moment.

The President. Well, I understand that. And the marketplace is making decisions as to whether the dollar should be strong or not. Our policy is a strong dollar. And we believe that good fiscal and monetary policy will cause our economy to grow and that the marketplace will see a growing economy and therefore strengthen the dollar.

But you're right, the market, at this point in time, has devalued the dollar, which is contrary to our policy.

Q. You're not going to launch a separate dollar for the vendor states and a separate dollar internationally, because there was a rumor like that. [Laughter]

The President. No, forget that. No, we're not going to do that.

Speculation About the War on Terror

Q. Tell me about rumors. Is there any seriousness behind today's press reports that America's next target is Iran and that your Armed Forces are going to use bases in the former Soviet republics Azerbaijan and Armenia?

The President. We've had all kinds of reports that we're going to use force in Syria. And now some on the left, I guess, are saying force in Iran or force here and force there. You know, it's pure speculation. And we used force in Iraq after a long, long period of diplomacy. Remember,

I was a person that went to the United Nations on September the 12th in 2002 and said, "Let's work together." And we got a resolution out of the United Nations.

Q. The 1441.

The President. Fourteen-forty-one. Then we tried to get a second resolution, which obviously was a stalemate. We never had a vote. And then—but the point was, is that I tried everything we could do diplomatically to bring about a common solution in dealing with Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction.

And so, you know, people love to speculate about U.S. intentions and our military. And I'm just telling you it's idle speculation.

Iraq

Q. Coming back to the U.S. role, now that the war in Iraq is over, there is still a new twist in this discussion about America's role, a natural leader or a self-proclaimed leader which enforces its—

The President. A natural leader.

Q. Natural leader.

The President. Emerging in Iraq, you're talking about the leadership of Iraq? Yes, the Iraqi people are plenty capable of picking their own leadership. There's a lot of work to do to create the conditions necessary for a smooth political process.

And the first thing is to improve the lives of the Iraqi people. I mean, make sure they've got food and electricity and water and sewer. And in many parts of the country, life is improving. Baghdad is difficult. Baghdad—the security is tough in Baghdad because—

Q. Did you expect anything like that?

The President. Sure. I mean, this is a country that had been enslaved for years by Saddam Hussein. And as we're discovering through the mass graves all around the countryside, he used torture and killing

to stay in power. And therefore, it's not surprising that after—I forget how many days we've been there, 70 or 80 days—that democracy hasn't sprung forth yet. It's going to take a while to improve conditions, and it's going to take a while to take care of the security issues within Baghdad. But life is improving, and that's what's important.

President's Upcoming Visit to Russia

Q. Now that you're going to Russia, last time, I remember, when you were planning your first trip you read Dostoyevsky. Now you read Dostoyevsky, you've dealt with Mr. Putin, what are your expectations now? Are you going to try anything in Russia, in the sense of a new political initiative or maybe taste something new?

The President. Well, I tell you, I think—first of all, I'm looking forward to going to St. Petersburg for my third time since I've been the President. It's a fantastic city. And Vladimir kindly invited Laura and me to go to the 300th anniversary of the city, and we're looking forward to it.

I think the most important thing that will come out the meetings with Vladimir Putin is the world will see that even though we had some disagreement on Iraq, that we're willing to continue to work together for the good of our respective countries as well as world peace.

Secondly, there will be a strategic—a formal strategic dialog established not only between Vladimir and me but throughout our bureaucracies, our different agencies, so that the Russian people and the American people know that we're working in concert to work on common opportunities as well as to deal with problems before they become acute.

President's View of Russia

Q. Now that you've dealt with Putin, read Dostoyevsky, have been to St. Petersburg three times, do you think you understand Russia better than you did in the past, or what's your notion?

The President. Well, first of all, Russia is a fantastic country with a great history. And I'm learning—I'm understanding the Russian mentality a little better. I will certainly not be an expert. I fortunately do have experts on my staff, starting with Condoleezza Rice, who has lived in Russia, studied Russia, understands Russia well.

My main focus has been to deal with Vladimir Putin, leader to leader, because I firmly believe that if we can establish trust between each other, then we can see to it that others in our administration begin to trust each other more. And trust is an important concept.

I never forget my first question I was asked, after having met Vladimir Putin in Slovenia, was from an enterprising U.S. reporter. He said, "Do you trust Vladimir Putin?" And I, without hesitating, said, "Yes." And he said, "How do you know?" I said, "I looked in his eyes and saw his soul."

We had just come from a very long conversation where we talked about family matters and we talked about our own personal lives. And I found in Vladimir a very genuine person, somebody with whom I could place my trust. And that doesn't mean we agree on every issue; don't get me wrong. But it does mean that we have the platform necessary to have good, positive relations so we can move our relations throughout our Government forward.

Q. Mr. President, thank you so much, indeed. Have a nice trip to Russia.

The President. I'm looking forward to it.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 2:36 p.m. on May 29 in the Library at the White House for later broadcast. The transcript was embargoed for release by the Office of the Press Secretary until 1:30 p.m. on May 31. In his remarks, the President referred to former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq and President Vladimir Putin of Russia. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.