

The President's News Conference With President Hamid Karzai of
Afghanistan in Kabul, Afghanistan
December 15, 2008

[At this point, President Karzai spoke in Dari, and no translation was provided.]

President Karzai. Most welcome, Mr. President. Most welcome.

President Bush. Thank you, sir. Yes, thanks, Mr. President; it's good to be with a dear friend. You and I have spent a lot of time together, and we have done a lot of work together, all aiming to give the people of Afghanistan a better life. And I'm proud to be with you.

I hope you understand why it is important for me to get back to Washington, and that is because my wife expects for me to be back in Washington. [Laughter] We have a holiday reception at the White House, and so I'm going to have to hustle back; after all, I did sneak out of town under the dark of night. And now I'm going to go back home having visited this important country. So thanks for having me. And she sends her best. As you well know, that Laura's—one of her great passions is to stand with the courageous women in Afghanistan. And I can assure you, Mr. President, that after our time in Washington, we both look forward to continuing to stay in touch and to continuing to stay engaged with the people of Afghanistan. So Laura sends her deep respect and great affection for the people of Afghanistan.

You know, I was thinking when I—right before we landed, how much Afghanistan has changed since I have been the President. And sometimes it's hard when you're in the midst of a difficult situation, it's hard to get perspective. In 2001, the Taliban were brutally repressing the people of this country. I remember the images of women being stoned or people being executed in the soccer stadium because of their beliefs. There was a group of killers that were hid-

ing here and training here and plotting here to kill citizens in my country.

Right after the attacks, I made it abundantly clear that we would bring people to justice for our own security and made it abundantly clear that if a group of people harbored a terrorist, they were equally as guilty as a terrorist. And we gave the Taliban an opportunity to respond; they didn't. And American troops proudly liberated the people of Afghanistan. That's what life was like.

Now we could have replaced one power person with another. That would have been, I guess, the easy route, and then just left it behind, say we've done our duty and we've upheld the doctrine, and said, "Okay, we're now going to take this group, replace them with this group," and just got out of the way. But that's not—that, one, didn't learn the lessons of the eighties and the nineties. And secondly, the interest is to build a flourishing democracy as an alternative to an hateful ideology. And it's not easy work. Afghanistan is a huge country. The road system is not nearly as well developed as a lot of other countries. You're just beginning to develop your resource base in a way that I hope benefits the people of Afghanistan; after all, it's their resources.

It's difficult because extremists refuse to accept the beauty of democracy. They've got a different vision, and so therefore, they're willing to kill innocent people to achieve their objectives.

There has been a lot of progress since 2001; after all, girls are back in school. I happen to believe that's important. As the father of twin girls, I couldn't imagine living in a society where my little girls couldn't have a chance to realize their God-given potential.

President Karzai. Yes.

President Bush. You've got boys flying kites again in Afghanistan. You've got health clinics up all across the country. The President was telling me of a health clinic in the remote northeast region of Afghanistan, a place where it had been unimaginable.

President Karzai. [Inaudible]

President Bush. Yes. The economy has more than doubled in size. It needs to double in size again, and then double in size again, no question. But it has doubled in size. Security forces are growing stronger. You've got good people in Afghanistan who are—you know, want to work to provide security so that a political process can grow behind it.

Now there's been good progress made, but there are a lot of tough challenges. One of the great, interesting things that I'll be watching—since I believe so strongly in democracy—are the upcoming elections. And I've talked to General McKiernan, he said—who's told me that—about the strategy, along with Ambassador Wood, about the strategy to help the Afghan folks—the military, and political leaders—get the elections up and running. And it's going to be an exciting time for the people of Afghanistan, to go to the polls and be able to express their opinion. And I'm sure the press corps, the Afghanistan press corps, is looking forward to covering the elections. It'll give you something to do in a very important part of your country's history.

I told the President that you can count on the United States; just like you've been able to count on this administration, you'll be able to count on the next administration as well. It's in our interest that Afghanistan's democracy flourish. It's in America's interest that we forever deny safe haven for people who still want to kill our citizens.

And so, Mr. President, I come bringing the greetings of the country. It has been a privilege to work with you over these years. I have come to admire you, I appreciate your service, and I wish you and the people of Afghanistan all the very best.

President Karzai. Most welcome, Mr. President; it's our pleasure and honor. Most welcome.

Presidential Transition/President-Elect Obama's Foreign Policy

Q. My question is from His Excellency, the President of the United States. First, if President-elect Obama brings any change in the war against terrorism in Afghanistan or any change in the strategy to—towards Afghanistan or in the policies? Being from the Republicans, will your party support his plannings?

And second, regarding he said he was in Pakistan and the terrorists in Pakistan, what's your message to Obama that how he should deal with Pakistani Government regarding terrorists, about the diplomat—using diplomatic ways or using military?

President Bush. Yes. Thank you. First, I am of a different political party than President-elect Obama. But I want him to succeed. I want him to do well. And to this end, we have worked hard to help the transition.

Secondly, I think it is interesting that he has picked Secretary Gates, the Secretary of Defense under—the last couple of years under my administration, who will be the Secretary of Defense under his administration. And I think that should send a clear signal to the people of Afghanistan that the transition will be a smooth transition.

I expect you'll see more U.S. troops here as quickly as possible in parts of the country that are being challenged by the Taliban. I remember when President Karzai and President Musharraf and I had the famous dinner at the White House.

President Karzai. Yes.

President Bush. And it—you know, the discussions really are the same today as they were then, and that is that extremists and terrorists and people who use car bombs and suicide bombers to achieve political objectives are a threat to all of us.

And that there needs to be a comprehensive strategy in helping the Pakistan Government deal with those who bring great harm on their citizens and bring harm on the citizens of Afghanistan.

So to answer your question, I think it's a—we need to have a collaborative strategy. We need to work together in a constructive way. And we are making progress along those lines. You know, I was with President Zardari in—I think it was in New York. And I had never met him before, and I was reminding him that I'm, you know, a person who says that we will defend our country and defend our people. The most important job for the President of the United States is defend our people from attack.

He said, "You don't have to talk to me about extremists attacking people, extremists killed my wife." And so we're—there's a lot of consultations going on with the President—I think you're going to be meeting with President Zardari soon.

President Karzai. Yes.

President Bush. And that's good, and I appreciate that.

Olivier [Olivier Knox, Agence France-Presse].

Military Operations in Afghanistan/Troop Levels in Afghanistan

Q. Thank you, gentlemen. I have one question for the two of you. Canada has announced it's pulling out in 2011; South Korea is already gone. In that context are you concerned about the level of international support for the war here, and are the 20,000 additional U.S. troops enough to bring this conflict to a close?

President Bush. Yes. Well, first of all, as you know, I've always relied upon our military commanders to make the recommendations necessary to achieve the objectives we've set forth. We have added troops during—twice during my Presidency—obviously, in the initial move in and then we added troops to that. I've announced we're going to send in more

troops. And then, of course, the Obama administration will be analyzing the situation, and it sounds like that they intend to expedite the—sending more troops in.

So—and why do we do that? Because this is what our generals suggest we do. To answer your—this is just going to be a long struggle, first of all. This doesn't end tomorrow. Ideological struggles take time. As a civil society whose firm political institutions begin to develop, extremism begins to wither; it gets marginalized, and then it withers away. And so it's going to take time. I can't tell you the troop levels we'll need; all I know is our generals said, this is what we need now. And they—I listened to them, and I'm confident President-elect Obama will listen to the commanders as well.

President Karzai. We are already very grateful to all those countries, nations who have come to help Afghanistan, and who have already helped Afghanistan. Canada is among the countries that's the frontrunner in assistance to Afghanistan. Their plans to withdraw their troops by 2011 or '12 is not in contradiction to the understanding that we have with them. They will continue to assist us in various other forms in Afghanistan.

What is important here is that while we are continuing to fight terrorism and to bring the institutional strength and stability to Afghanistan, with an improved economy and improved governance and service delivery by the Government, we also work on enabling Afghanistan to eventually stand on its own feet. The Afghan people don't want to be a burden on the international community forever. And we are grateful already that the international community is helping us in blood and their taxpayers' money.

We are grateful to Canada. We are grateful to all other countries, as partners for building Afghanistan, for fighting terrorists who are the enemies of all of us. So we are happy in any form of assistance other countries give us and will be grateful for it.

One—pick up one more question, Mr. President? You'd like to continue?

President Bush. All those who want another question, raise your hand. [*Laughter*] I guess so, Mr. President.

[*A reporter began to ask a question in Dari.*]

President Bush. Hold on a second.

Progress in Afghanistan/Military Operations in Afghanistan

[*The reporter continued his question, and no translation was provided.*]

President Bush. I respectfully disagree with you. The Taliban was brutalizing the people of Afghanistan. And they're not in power. And I just cited the progress that is undeniable.

Now, is there more work to be done? You bet. I never said the Taliban was eliminated; I said they were removed from power. And I said girls are going back to school, and boys are flying kites, and health clinics are opening, and the number of university students is dramatically expanding, and the number of schools around the country is growing, and there's a ring road built. Yes, there's no question there's a Taliban that wants to fight back. Why? Because they want to regain power. They can't stand the thought of a free society. And they're lethal, and they are tough. No question about it, no question about it.

So therefore, is the suggestion because they're tough that we just withdraw, that it's too hard work? Not as far as I'm concerned. I think it's necessary work. And it's in the interest of the United States that we not allow Afghanistan to become a safe haven again for Al Qaida. Al Qaida is greatly weakened since 2001. As a matter of fact, they at one point declared the most central front in the war on terror in Iraq, where they're doing very poorly.

And they're not doing so well here either. Now, they can hide in remote regions. They can hide, but we will stay on the hunt, and we will keep the pressure on

them, because it's in the people—the peaceful people of Afghanistan's interest, just like it's in the interest of this country.

And so is there still difficult days ahead? Absolutely. But are the conditions a lot better today in Afghanistan than they were in 2001? Unquestionably, undoubtedly, they're better.

[*President Karzai spoke in Dari, and no translation was provided.*]

President Karzai. Mr. President.

President Bush. Steven Lee [Steven Lee Myers, New York Times].

Troop Levels in Afghanistan

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. If I could ask President Karzai first. We just came from Iraq, where they've signed an agreement outlining a security arrangement, and it includes a withdrawal of American forces within 3 years. I wonder if you envisioned a similar kind of arrangement where—would you like to see a scheduled withdrawal or a timetable of withdrawal for the foreign forces who are in Afghanistan? Thank you.

President Karzai. Well, sir, Afghanistan is in a cooperative arrangement with the United States and the rest of the international community. The decision in Afghanistan is to continue our cooperation with the international community until we have defeated terrorism and extremism and the threat that emanates from them to us, to our neighbors, and to the rest of the world. And Afghanistan will not allow the international community to leave it before we are fully on our feet, before we are strong enough to defend our country, before we are powerful enough to have a good economy, and before we have taken from President Bush and the next administration billions and billions of more dollars—[*laughter*—no way that they can let you go.

President Bush. Yes, you better hurry up, in my case. [*Laughter*]

Thank you, sir. Thank you, all.

President Karzai. Most welcome, most welcome. Take care. Thanks very much. Thank you.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 7:53 a.m. at the Presidential Palace. In his remarks, he referred to Gen. David D. McKiernan, USA, commander, NATO International Security Assistance Force, Af-

ghanistan; former President Pervez Musharraf and President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan; and former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, who was killed in a suicide attack in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, on December 27, 2007. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of this press conference.

Remarks on Lighting the Hanukkah Menorah December 15, 2008

Please be seated. Welcome to the White House. You may have heard I've had a pretty eventful weekend. *[Laughter]*

So I slipped out Saturday night to Andrews Air Force Base, boarded Air Force One, and landed in Baghdad, Iraq, on Sunday afternoon. It was an unbelievable experience—it really was—to stand next to the President of a democracy and hold my hand over my heart as they played the national anthem in front of one of Saddam Hussein's palaces. I then had—*[applause]*. And then I had the honor to thank our brave troops who have helped make the transformation in Iraq possible.

This morning we landed in Afghanistan. I spoke to American forces serving courageously to make sure that Afghanistan never becomes a safe haven from which the killers could launch attacks on the homeland.

And then I met with President Karzai, who is determined to help the young democracy survive. And so he said, "Why don't you hang around for a while?" And I said, "Well, you don't understand. *[Laughter]* I need to get back to the White House for an important event." *[Laughter]* The Hanukkah reception is always one of the most special events of the season. Laura and I are pleased to be with so many friends. And we are honored to gather with leaders of the Jewish community to cele-

brate our final Hanukkah here in the White House.

I want to thank our Attorney General for joining us. General, I appreciate you and Susan joining us. I am proud to be here with one of America's great United States Senators, Joe Lieberman—*[applause]*—his greatness made possible by his wife Hadassah, I might add. *[Laughter]* And one of the young leaders of the United States Congress, Eric Cantor, and his wife Diana. And we're proud to be here with Kol Zimra as well, who will perform later.

The story of Hanukkah recalls the miraculous victory of a small band of patriots against tyranny and the oil that burned for eight nights. Through centuries of exile and persecution, Jews have lit the menorah. Each year, they behold its glow with faith in the power of God and love for His greatest gift, freedom.

This Hanukkah we celebrate another miraculous victory, the 60th anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel. When President Harry Truman led the world in recognizing Israel in May of 1948, many wondered whether the small nation could possibly survive. Yet from the first days of independence, the people of Israel defied dire predictions. With determination and hard work, they turned a rocky desert into fertile soil. They built a thriving democracy, a strong economy, and one of the mightiest