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Interview With the Armed Forces Media

December 22, 1995

Bosnia

The President. First let me say that I have just come from a briefing here at the Pentagon with our senior military officials who are working on the mission in Bosnia. We've also had a teleconference with General Joulwan, getting the latest up-to-date briefing on the conditions of the deployment. And I would say—I should emphasize to you two things.

One is that, notwithstanding some weather problems and a few delays occasioned by Christmas traffic on the rails in Germany, we're pretty much on schedule. And secondly, and even more important, the attitude toward compliance thus far in Bosnia by all parties has been quite good. Now, it's early in the mission, but so far the attitude toward compliance has been very good, and we're encouraged by that. And we think we can stay on schedule for the separation of the forces and the other elements of it.

And also in this Christmas season, I'd like to remind the people who serve our country that we are doing this essentially for three reasons. First of all, because we can do it, and when we can do something like this, it's consistent with our values to stop suffering and slaughter on the scale we've seen it in Bosnia.

Second, because it's very much in our interest to contain and end this war, to prevent it from spreading in a way that can involve our NATO allies on opposite sides and many other countries that are critical to the stability of Europe. It's also important for us to do what we can to promote a stable and democratic and free Europe. We, after all, have fought two World Wars because we did not have such a Europe; we had a long cold war because we did not have such a Europe. So it's in our interest.

And finally, it is critical to our ability to lead the world for the next 10 or 20 years as we sort out what the security arrangements of the post-cold-war era will be. I can tell you that our leadership of NATO specifically, and in general our ability to lead in the world toward peace and democracy, is very much tied to our willingness to assume a leadership role in this Bosnia mission.

I could see it on my recent trip to Europe, whether it was talking to Prime Ministers in Great Britain or Ireland or Germany or Spain or just to people on the street. It means a lot to them to know that the United States is still there working and leading and being a good partner.

So for all these reasons, I think this is a very, very important mission to our country.

Q. Thank you, sir. Mr. President, I'm Austin Camacho from the AFRTS News Center. After Operation Joint Endeavor, what do you see as the U.S. role in that area formerly known as Yugoslavia? What will be our role there?

The President. Well, I think, first of all, we'll still be there through NATO and whatever role that NATO assumes in the general area beyond our NATO member nations. But more importantly, I would expect, after this mission is over, we will continue to have American citizens, both people who work for and represent our Government and people in the private sector, going in and out of there helping in the reconstruction effort, contributing to that, supporting the political process in whatever way we can.

But I think it is quite important that the NATO force not become an occupying army. We're not dealing with Berlin here. We're not—all we're trying to do is to give this peace agreement a chance to take hold. And we have a very clear and limited mission. In fact, I want to make sure that all of our folks know that, as far as I know, this peace agreement is the first one ever where the military annex to the agreement was actually written

by the military commanders who were going to be expected to implement it. That is, the parties actually asked our military people to fashion the military annex to the agreement that was initiated in Dayton so that there would be a limited, defined, strictly military mission.

Q. Mr. President, do you agree with the premise that Bosnia is really the first test of post-cold-war policy?

The President. Well, I think it's been tested in other ways, but it's certainly the most significant military test of our post-cold-war policy if you accept the premise that what happened in the Gulf at the Gulf war could have occurred during the cold war as well as afterward, that this is literally a post-cold-war problem. Then it is the biggest military test.

Q. Does that mean that—what is the success or failure of this then mean to American foreign policy 10, 15 years down the line?

The President. Well, let me just say I think the most important thing here is that the United States was prepared to lead and to work with our NATO allies. If you remember, in the beginning when the Bosnian war broke out, a lot of our European allies said, ''Well, we ought to take the leadership role here. We'll do this. We'll do it through the United Nations.'' And we've played a very strong supporting role through NATO. After all, it's important that the United States never forget that during these last 4 tough years, we led in the conduct of the largest humanitarian airlift in history; we led in enforcing the no-fly zone, keeping the war out of the air, and a lot of other things that were done, including NATO's willingness to use air strikes to, first of all, bring about a relatively peaceful 1994 and then to bring about the conditions in which a peace agreement could be made in 1995.

But what I believe this means, if we make this effort and if we succeed in our military mission, even if, God forbid, after we're all gone the thing should come apart, at least we will be united in doing what we can do to promote stability in Europe and to take a stand for peace in the post-cold-war era.

If you remember when I sent our troops into Haiti with a U.N.-led mission, and then when I left a smaller number there when the United Nations took over on schedule, I always said that we could not guarantee the people of Haiti a future; they would have to do that for themselves. The same is true for the Bosnians. We cannot guarantee for them a future without war. What we can guarantee for them is a year without war, during which they can implement their own agreement and in which time they can have elections, they can begin the economic reconstruction, they can begin to see the benefits of peace, and then some equilibrium within the country can be established from a security point of view.

But I think it would be a mistake for the United States or for NATO to believe that we should be going around anywhere guaranteeing the results of peace agreements which have to be guaranteed in the minds and hearts of the people who are making them.

So this will be a success for our alliance, for our leadership, just by doing the mission. Obviously, it will be a much, much greater success if the humanitarian relief, the refugee relocation, the economic reconstruction all are completely successful and Bosnia has a permanent peace. That is the real measure of success. But the main thing is we have to define together where we must try and where we must stand against chaos. And I think we've done a good job of that here.

Q. Mr. President, Cindy Killion from the European Stars and Stripes. Under what circumstances would you order the U.S. forces to withdraw from Bosnia within the next year, before the one-year mark?

The President. The only circumstance that I can imagine doing that is if the mission no longer existed. That is, keep in mind, we are there not to fight a war. We are there not to stop a war. We are there to implement a peace agreement. We anticipate that there will be violations of this agreement but that the leaders will not abandon it and that the vast bulk of the people will not abandon it. So we have to be prepared for some violations. We even have to be prepared for some casualties, although I think our people have trained and planned as hard against problems for this mission as they ever have for any.

But that would not cause me to withdraw. I believe that NATO would determine, if all the factions decided they wanted to go fight

again, that there was no longer a mission to perform.

Defense Authorization Bill

Q. Hi, Bill Matthews with Army Times. Switching a little bit to the defense authorization bill, you have said you are going to veto it. The bill includes a pay raise and a housing allowance increase for military people. Since some of them are headed off to Bosnia, are you concerned that not getting the pay raise, not getting the housing allowance increase would be detrimental to morale? And is there some alternative?

The President. Very much. Yes, there is an alternative. The Congress could send me a separate bill with the pay raise and the allowances in it, and I would sign it in a heartbeat. I think, indeed I hope, that they will do one of two things: I hope they will either do that, or when I veto this bill, assuming my veto would be sustained, which I believe it would because there are some unconstitutional restrictions on the President's authority as Commander in Chief in this bill which compels me to veto it—so they can either send me the pay raise and the allowance increase in a separate bill or they could delete the offending portions of the defense authorization bill and send it right back to me. They can do either one of those things. And I would hope the Congress would promptly act to do that.

I do not want any erosion of morale and spirit among not only our people in uniform but their family members. I believe that we are completely united in supporting the full pay raise and the allowance increase. And I have done my best to budget for these things over a period of several years.

I have visited a large number of our military facilities, both in the United States and beyond our borders. I have talked to a lot of people in uniform about this. And I think it is a very important issue. If we want to keep the very best people in our military, we're going to have to see to the quality-of-life issues. We've allocated a lot of money for it over the next budget cycle, and I want to release it, starting with these two issues.

Defense Spending

Q. Mr. President, Jim Wolffe, also from the Army Times. On a slightly longer term budget issue, the Republican 7-year budget plan, while it has more money for defense in the first couple of years, actually targets less money towards defense spending in the out-years 2000 and beyond. Secretary Perry said earlier this week that that would force him into the difficult decision of actually cutting force structure to pay for modernization.

You've talked a lot about social spending in the budget debate, but I haven't heard you talk much about defending defense spending. Is that something you're willing to give away to get a deal?

The President. Well, let me say that I still hope that I can work with Congress in a way that that choice won't be necessary. It is true that they front-loaded more defense spending than we did, which made it very attractive to all the people who wanted it in these years. But what we tried to do was to have a balanced commitment.

I think the worst thing that can happen to the military is to be jerked around with these up and down budgets and unpredictability. What we tried to do is to get our folks together here and to say, "Okay, what do we need over the next 5 years? What do we need over the next 7 years?" The only thing I can say to you, and I would say with some sense of assurance, is that our political system has shown a willingness now to respond if there's a problem created for our forces in uniform and for our national defense.

I mean, I think—one of the things you see that in the last 3 years is we've had a remarkable bipartisan ability to maintain a strong defense as a part of our continuing engagement in the post-cold-war world. And I think that everyone knows that the military went through a significant downsizing with a remarkable maintenance of excellence and morale and that now we have to sustain the system that we have created.

And so I would say to our forces in uniform, I'm going to get the very best budget agreement I can. I hope we can get an agreement. But if there is an alarming tailoff in years 6 and 7, I think it can be corrected in the future. And I believe if we balance the budget, get interest rates down, the econ-

omy will grow more quickly. And one of the big differences between me and the Republicans in Congress is that they have now given me an economic plan which says if we do everything they want, at the end of 6 or 7 years interest rates and unemployment will be higher than they are now. I find that very hard to believe. I think that we're going to be better off, not worse off, if we do this, and we'll have more money, therefore, to invest in defense.

So I would not worry too much about the out-years. Whatever happens in this budget agreement, at least as long as I am here—and I can't conceive of anyone else coming into this job or anyone coming into control of the Congress that would not try to sustain a long-term plan for the military, because that's what we've learned—that if the military has a plan they can do nearly anything, but we can't jack around the plan. And we don't want to play games with people's lives or with the national security.

Bosnia and Politics

Q. Mr. President, I'm Dave Gollust from Voice of America. Can I jump back to Bosnia for a second and politics? How important do you consider the success of the Bosnia operation to your own political prospects? Is it a defining moment for you? And secondly, from a tactical point of view, would you mind if Senator Dole was the first senior political presence in Bosnia on Christmas?

The President. Well, let me answer the first question. If you look at recent American history, the evidence is that the success of the Bosnia operation may not have much to do with the election in 1996, but the failure of the Bosnia operation or the sustaining of significant casualties could have a great deal to do with it in a negative way. And that's all. The conventional political wisdom is, ''Why would the President do this? There's no upside and tons of downside.''

But I have to say, when you take a job, you have to do what you—you have to do the job. And to be President at the edge of the 21st century, in a time of dramatic, dramatic change in the way we work and live and relate to each other, means that you can't predict the future and you just have to do what you think is right. So for me, this was not—once I became convinced we could train for this mission, that we could define the mission in the peace agreement, that we could minimize the risks to our troops, then the decision to me was not so difficult, no matter what the political downside, because I believe, in a time like this, you have to ask yourself which decision would you rather defend 10 years from now when you're not in office, if it goes wrong?

I would much rather explain to my child and my grandchildren why the United States tried to stop slaughter, prevent the spread of the war, maintain NATO instead of destroy it, maintain the leadership of the United States in the world for peace and freedom. I would much rather explain why we tried to do that than why, because of the short-term political problems, we permitted the war to resume, it expanded, NATO's alliance was destroyed, and the influence of the United States was compromised for 10 years.

I think it's obvious if you look at it that way—what do you want to tell your grandchildren 10 years from now? That the United States is doing the right thing. And the political risk is part of the price you pay for being President. Anybody who doesn't want to take any political risk at a time like this should not run for the job.

Now, in terms of who goes to Bosnia when, I don't think we should politicize it. Senator Dole and I worked together to get the support that the Senate gave to this mission. He expressed his reservations about it, but he supported my decision as Commander in Chief. I appreciated that. And obviously, at the appropriate time, I have no objection to either Senator Dole or anyone else for that matter going to Bosnia.

The question is, when is the appropriate time? If I had my way, I would be spending Christmas Eve and Christmas morning there. That's what I wanted to do. But our commanders made it clear that when a President comes into Bosnia, if I fly into that airport at Tuzla, and then I go down to Sarajevo when they're in the middle of this deployment, it would be exceedingly disruptive. So even though I wanted to go there to say to the American people I believe this mission is on the right track and, most importantly, to support the troops and to reassure their

families, I'm taking the advice of the military commanders. I do not want to interrupt this mission.

The mission's success is the most important thing. And that's what I believe should guide everyone. I think everyone—there are different levels of disruption that different trips would cause, and I think we ought to try to just keep it nonpolitical. I hope anybody that wants to go there that has a reason to go, including Senator Dole, will be able to go at the appropriate time. And that's the determination that needs to be made.

Q. Mr. President, you mentioned the safety of the troops as being part of your decision a couple times in that last answer. We're sending quite a large force involved in the Bosnia mission. Some might say, awfully large for a peaceful mission. How extensive do you think the danger is to our troops there?

The President. Well, I think there is—let's look at what the sources are. No one can—the extent of the danger depends on factors that we can't fully predict. But I believe that we have minimized the risks. What are the possible problems? First of all, if you look at what the United Nations went through over the last 4 years, I think something over 200 people lost their lives in Bosnia. But more than half of them lost their lives in accidents. So we have really worked hard to train against accidents, to prepare—to look at the roadways, to look at the railways, to look at the airfields. We've worked hard to minimize the loss of life or serious injury due to accidents.

Then we know there are a lot of land mines there. I got a very encouraging report today that the parties themselves in many places are assisting us in removing the mines. But there are a lot of places where there are a lot of mines laid where the land was first in one hand and then another, where we don't have records of the mines, where people don't have memories of them. So we have trained very hard to deal with land mines. I think that's the next biggest danger after accidents.

Then the third problem is people that fought in that war who are either from the country or who came in from without the country who may have either a specific grudge against the United States or, more likely, will just be frustrated because they don't agree with the peace agreement that the leaders made and, therefore, some—and then, fourthly, there is just the possibility of encounters that go wrong. The only casualty we sustained in Haiti had nothing to do with opposition to our being there. It was a man who was literally a common criminal who ran through a barrier, and there was an incident, and he shot one of our soldiers dead.

So I would say that those are the dangers in order.

Q. Mr. President, I think that's all the time we have.

The President. Thank you, and Merry Christmas. I appreciate what you do.

NOTE: The interview began at 10:35 a.m. in the Visual Recording Facility at the National Military Command Center, the Pentagon. The following journalists participated in the interview: Sgt. Austin Camacho, American Forces Radio and Television Service; Jim Garamone, American Forces Information Service; Cindy Killion, Stars and Stripes; Bill Matthews and Jim Wolffe, Army Times; and David Gollust, Voice of America. In his remarks, the President referred to Gen. George A. Joulwan, USA, Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

Statement on Signing Limited Continuing Appropriations Legislation

December 22, 1995

Today I have signed into law House Joint Resolution 136, which ensures that the Government makes veterans' benefit payments to 3.3 million veterans and their survivors without further delay.

The resolution also provides funding for several vitally important programs for children and families. It continues funding for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), ensuring that nearly 9 million children receive benefits vital to their well-being. It funds child care for about 600,000 children whose parents are trying to work their way off welfare. And it continues funding for State child support enforcement agencies to ensure that "deadbeat dads" do not get a reprieve from supporting their children.