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Interview With Mark Knoller of CBS Radio in Dover, New Hampshire

January 11, 2001

No Gun Ri

Mr. Knoller. Mr. President, let me start by thanking you very much for granting this interview. I'm very grateful.

I wonder if we could start with a little bit of the news of the day. Today you issued a written statement expressing deep regret for the deaths at No Gun Ri. But the word "apologize" didn't appear in that statement. Is there a reason for that, that you drew a distinction between expressing regret and apologizing?

The President. Well, for me, now, other than that—I told them to try to draw the statement up based on what we actually knew about the facts. And I worked very closely with—or our people have—with the Government of South Korea. We want to be responsive to the people there. And I hope the statement will be taken well by the people of South Korea as a genuine expression of regret about what happened.

Lieutenant Commander Michael Speicher

Mr. Knoller. On another issue, there's a story now that a Navy pilot may have been shot down and may be held in Iraq. Do you have any information that leads you to believe that there are Americans held POW in Iraq?

The President. Well, I think the most I should say about this now is that in this particular case, and in this case only, I reviewed the evidence that we had, and we concluded that we should take him off the killed-in-action list and put him on the missing list, which means, obviously, that we have some information that leads us to believe that he might be alive. And we hope and pray that he is.

Mr. Knoller. What does the United States do about it?

The President. Well, now that we have some information, we'll begin—well, we've already begun working to try to determine whether, in fact, he's alive; if he is, where he is; and how we can get him out. Because, since he was a uniformed service person, he's clearly entitled to be released, and we're going to do everything we can to get him out.

Mr. Knoller. If Iraq was holding an American, they couldn't use it as an issue with the United States unless they let us know they had somebody. Why would they hold somebody and not let us know about it? Would that be to their advantage?

The President. I wouldn't think so. That's why we did what we did on the classification. We have enough information that makes us believe that at least he survived his crash, at least that that's a possibility, and that he might be alive. And I thought, in fairness to his family and everyone else involved, based on a review of the information and the Defense Department's recommendation, we should change the status. But that's all we know, and I don't want to raise false hopes to either.

U.S.S. Cole

Mr. Knoller. Along the same lines, do we now know for certain that Usama bin Ladin was behind the attack on the U.S.S. *Cole*?

The President. I can't say that. I can—we do believe he was behind some other attacks on our people and that people affiliated with him have been involved in other attacks. But we're investigating this. We're still running down some of the leads. We're still doing some of the work. I think that we will know, and I think that the United States will take appropriate action.

And I believe this will be a completely nonpolitical issue. That is, I have absolutely no doubt that President-elect Bush will continue to pursue the investigation and, when the evidence is in, will take appropriate action. And when that happens, I will support him in doing so.

Attorney-General-Designate John Ashcroft

Mr. Knoller. And lastly, on a bit of domestic politics, do you think that Senators would have a good reason not to vote for John Ashcroft for Attorney General because he blocked your nomination of Ronnie White?

The President. Well, first, I think that it was a terrible mistake by the Senate to do it, to do it on a strict party-line vote, which required them to get some Republicans to

change their position, including the other Senator from Missouri, who had introduced Judge White to the Judiciary Committee, and the Senators on the Judiciary Committee who had voted his nomination out positively to the floor. So I think it was a very, very bad mistake.

I'm going to follow my policy here. You know, I'll be an ex-President when this is done, and I do not believe I should be commenting for some period of time on public affairs, plus which my wife is a Senator. She has to vote on it. So I'm going to let—she can speak for herself, and the other Democrats and Republicans will speak for themselves. I don't think I should say more.

I do think it was a bad mistake. I've known Senator Ashcroft a long time. I know he is genuinely very, very conservative, and that's what's in his heart. But I didn't think this was about that, and it surprised and profoundly disappointed me.

Mr. Knoller. I thought that with just 9 days left, you might speak out with a little more reckless abandon than usual. [*Laughter*]

The President. Look, I need my Miranda warnings when I talk to you guys, you know. [*Laughter*] I can't even make a joke in Chicago without having it blown out of proportion. So I'm having to—I have to still be careful. [*Laughter*]

2000 Presidential Election

Mr. Knoller. Well, as long as you raised that issue, were you trying to say that you question the legitimacy of George Bush's election?

The President. No. No. I have said clearly that I agree with exactly what Vice President Gore said, that in this country we observe the principle of judicial review. The Supreme Court has ruled, and the rest of us have to accept it. And that confers, in a legal sense, a literal legal sense, that confers legitimacy. But I didn't say anything different than I've always said; all the Democrats were disappointed that the votes weren't counted. And that's all I'm saying.

And I was trying to pay a little homage to Bill Daley in his hometown of Chicago, with a lot of his family and friends there, by saying—you know, he did, I think, did a very good job running the Vice President's campaign. They did win the popular vote. And that's all I was saying. We were having a good time. [*Laughter*]

Early Years of the Administration

Mr. Knoller. Again, let's look back at your 8 years in office, Mr. President. After you were inaugurated in January of 1993, how long do you think it took you to get up to speed as President?

The President. Well, I would say there has—there's a different answer to that depending on what the issue—the question is. For example, I think that the issues that I talked about today when I reviewed our domestic record on social policy, I think we were ready from day one. I think we were—and I think part of that was the fact that I'd been a Governor for a dozen years, that I'd been through a tough economic period, had a clear economic philosophy, had worked on education and welfare reform and crime and the environment. Part of it was the fact that I'd had the opportunity to represent the Governors with the White House and the Congress on many issues. So we were ready to go.

On foreign policy, I think I was up to speed on some things and had to learn a lot on others, and I tried to be a quick study. On the ways of Washington, I think it took us probably, you know, even as much as a year, a year and a half, before we really had a good feel for some of the rather different ways in which the town works and the ways in which what a President does and says communicates itself to the other decisionmakers and to the larger American public in a way that was quite different than had been my experience as Governor.

So I did have a lot to learn about that, and I worked hard at it, and I think—it's interesting; I was laughing the other day with Mack McLarty, to illustrate the point—we had our roughest political problems in the first 2 years, but if you look back on the last 8 years, some of the most important and, I believe, most fundamentally sound decisions were made in those same 2 years.

We passed the first big—first we passed the economic plan, which included, among other things, the empowerment zones and

the earned-income tax credit and all the things that got rid of the deficit, as well. And then we passed the family medical law. We passed the Brady law. We passed the crime bill. We passed NAFTA. You know, we did a phenomenal number of things in those first 2 years, substantively. But because of the whole sort of contentious atmosphere, some of the problems that we had with health care and other issues, I think that it was not as successful politically—and I say that in the best sense—politically, meaning we didn't communicate as well to the American people or the other decisionmakers in Washington in a way that people could see exactly what was happening and that we were underway here.

So I think it took me longer to get the politics right. I think it took a little while for me to get entirely comfortable with all the foreign policy and national security issues I had to deal with—not too long. And I think we were ready on the substance of domestic policy from day one.

President-Elect George W. Bush

Mr. Knoller. As we're about to inaugurate a new President, can the American people believe that its new President will be ready for the job on day one, or do we have to give them a period for on-the-job training?

The President. Well, I think he is like any new President. I think he has certain strengths and will be ready in some ways, and I don't think any human being can be ready in every way on day one. I think that's why, traditionally, Presidents have had a little bit of a honeymoon to get going. But it is a job, like other jobs, and people of good will who work at it can do it.

I think he's obviously got all these people around him who—going back to the Ford administration, heavily involving the Reagan and Bush administrations—people that have worlds of experience and will help him avoid some of the pitfalls which otherwise might come his way—or anybody's way, going into that job. And so I think the dealing with Washington part of it, and through the players in Washington, with the press, I think he will be better prepared on that score than I was.

I think on national security, he's got a very, very experienced team, so I think that he will get up to speed there in fairly short order. And on domestic policies, we have different views, and that's where the points of greatest conflict were in the campaign between our two sides. But I think on some things, like education, he's had the opportunity to really work in Texas on, and I think his concern is genuine. And on other things, we'll just have to see what happens.

I mean, I was a Governor for a dozen years, in good times and bad times. There's a world of difference between a Governor in a good time and a Governor in a bad time. So I think that he will need some time to get kind of just the—kind of feel the rhythm of some of these domestic issues, because they weren't part of his experience. But I think that the American people shouldn't particularly worry about that because he's got a very experienced team, because he has been a Governor, and because the country is in real good shape right now. And I think he'll get right up there to speed on the issues as quickly as possible. I'm not too worried about that.

Health Care

Mr. Knoller. As you look back over your years in office, are there things, big things, that you wish you could do over or do differently?

The President. Oh, a few. If I had it to do again, in the first 2 years I might try to pass welfare reform first, and then do health care. Or I would tell the American people that we had to do the deficit reduction first, and there were only two ways to have universal health coverage.

Let me just back up and say, a lot of people believe that if the health care plan had been differently designed or something, it could have passed. That's just not true. The truth is that because of the combined effect of the condition of the economy and the inability to raise taxes, we could have neither an employer mandate or a Government-funded program sufficient to insure 100 percent of health care coverage. It wasn't in the cards.

And I think—that's one of the things I talked about. I got a lot done. I mentioned at the end of this speech all the things that

have happened this year—unheard of in the eighth year of a Presidency for all these things to happen. But I have a much greater sense now of the pace of things and how much you can jam through a system. And so, if I had it to do again, I think I would either try to flip the order and do welfare reform and then health care, or I would go before the American people and say, "Look, I know I told you that I wanted 100 percent coverage, and I do, but here's the condition of the budget; here is the condition of the country. I can't pass either an employer mandate or a tax increase, and you can't get 100 percent coverage without either one. So we're going to take these five steps now."

If I had it to do over again. I think in a policy sense, that was the place where the wheel kind of ran off the tracks and we got a little out of position with the American people, and we took that terrible licking in the '94 campaign. But since then, I think we've been doing better both substantively and politically.

President's Future Plans

Mr. Knoller. When you leave office at noon on January 20th, are you fearful that as you approach the next stage in your life, that the best part of your life is over?

The President. Oh, no. You know, in some ways this is the best part of my life because being President is the greatest honor any American could have and the greatest job any American could have. But I've given a lot of thought to this. I have enjoyed every phase of my life, from being a little boy to going off to college, to living in England, to being a teacher, to being a young attorney general. There's never been a part of my life in which I have not been absorbed, interested, and found something useful to do.

And I think that I owe it to my country, and to the people around the world who share the values and concerns I do, to try to be a good citizen-servant for the rest of my life. And if I do it right, it's a whole new challenge trying to figure out, how are you going to organize your life, how are you going to organize your day? I mean, for 27 years, most days since I entered public life I have just been on a relentless schedule, and I have the opportunity now to kind of reimagine what I want my life to be like.

I want to do what I can to support Hillary—I'm thrilled and—I'm more than thrilled, I'm just ecstatic that she won that Senate race, and I'm happy for her and happy for the people of New York—and help Chelsea as she works her way in her life. So I have some financial support responsibilities. But beyond that, I just want to try to imagine how I can be of the most service in the most effective but appropriate way.

Just because I'm working until the last day here, which I'm definitely doing, doesn't mean that I don't understand that after noontime on January 20th I'm not President anymore. And I know what I'm supposed to do there, too, and I'm going to go home to New York and get on with my life. But I don't know exactly how I'm going to do it yet, but I've given quite a bit of thought to it.

Mr. Knoller. And when you said 4 years ago, as you were campaigning for reelection, that that was your last election ever unless you ran for school board, are you going to stick to that?

The President. Yes, I can't imagine I would run for office again. And you know, if I'm fortunate enough to live a long life and I stay healthy, maybe some day, somewhere down the road, somebody will say, "Why don't you run for this, that, or the other thing," and I would think about it. But that's not really where I see my public service going. I do believe I owe it to myself and to my country to continue to be a servant, a public servant. But I think there are a lot of ways you can do that as a private citizen.

And there's a whole new generation of young people coming up. This country will never have a shortage of good, gifted people willing to serve in public life. And I think that's something I should leave to others.

Surviving Politics in Washington

Mr. Knoller. During your Presidency, sir, you have survived travails that would have sent other politicians either running for cover or killed them, and yet you have survived them. To what do you owe this ability to survive bad situations?

The President. Well, I'd say a couple of things. I think, first of all, I had an indomitable mother, and I was raised to believe that every person should live on Churchill's edict, "Never quit."

And I had a high pain threshold. I remember once I was in an accident in a car in high school, and my jaw hit the steering wheel real hard, and it was the steering wheel that broke, not my jaw. I have a high pain threshold. That's pretty important. And since modern American politics, certainly for the last 20 years, have been a pretty brutal contact sport, that's important.

But I think by far the most important thing is what I talked about here today. I mean, I never thought the political office was primarily about personal attainment or ego or validation or even being thought well of. I always thought it was a job designed to achieve larger purposes for the people you were representing. And that's why I came to New Hampshire to give this speech. Apart from my sentimental attachment to the State, we proved here in '92 that if you have good ideas and they relate to people and their lives and their future, that you can survive personal adversity, because people understood this was about a common, larger endeavor.

And I think that's another thing. I never, in the darkest days, I never lost sight of the fact that however many days I had left as President, every one was a privilege and a pleasure, and I should be working for the people. And I think they sensed that. I think that, more than anything else, answers the question you asked.

Presidential Security

Mr. Knoller. During your Presidency, sir, were there any security close calls that we didn't know about?

The President. I'm just thinking. I'm not sure. You remember when the guy shot up the White House with the assault weapon, although you guys were in more danger than me. The bullets were directed toward the press room, but he didn't know that. But I don't think so. There were periods when I had an unusually large number of threats, but the Secret Service handled them and did well. As far as I know, there was nothing significant you don't know about.

Farewell Address

Mr. Knoller. Are you going to do a farewell address?

The President. I'm thinking about it. I have tried to—as I mentioned today in my speech here, I tried to structure a series of speeches, in one of which I spoke to the larger world when I went to Great Britain and spoke at Warwick University after—about the global challenge of the 21st century. Then I made many of the same points at the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

And then I made the education speech in Chicago and this speech here today. And I'm going home to Arkansas to speak to the Arkansas Legislature, where I spoke on my inaugural the five times I was Governor, and I'll talk a little more about substantive domestic issues. So I will have laid out my case for what I hope America will do in the future pretty much by the end of my term in these last few weeks in these speeches.

I may do another farewell address just so I can thank the country as a whole and say a few specific things. But it will be—if I do, it would be much briefer and less indepth on the policy stuff.

Use of Polling Data

Mr. Knoller. Bum rap or not, sir, you, more than any other President, used polling data during your term in office to guide you.

The President. Well, but let me just say, so did Roosevelt. Roosevelt was the first President to be almost obsessive about polls. But I never was controlled by them because I always believed if you were right, you could find a way to change public opinion.

Only a fool, I think, ignores research data on a constant basis. I mean, that's like television ratings or anything else. You look at research data. But I did—I believe that you'd be hard pressed to find any President in the last several decades who's done a larger number of things which were not popular at the moment.

And one of the things that I used polls for was to understand how aware the public was of given issues or, if they disagree with me on an issue, what was the most effective argument I could make to try to persuade them. But I didn't—especially on issues affecting America's future, I never let the polls

control me. But the economic plan was not popular. It passed by one vote, and I knew it was the right thing to do. The decision to help Mexico was opposed 81–15. Bosnia, Kosovo, Haiti, those things were not popular. But I thought they were right, and I thought they could be made popular.

And let me give you some other things. By contrast, if you took polls in the beginning, it would appear that the public overwhelmingly agreed with me on all the gun safety issues, but there's no question that one of the reasons we lost seats in the Congress in '94 was because of the efforts of the NRA. If you took polls on the health care issue in '94, they all looked to be popular, but it turned out not to be.

And the reason for that is—but I was not unaware of that; I knew that—you have to understand how to read polls. I mean, you could be on a popular issue, but if the people who are against you are more intense than the people who are for you, it will still be a net loss at voting time.

So I was never paralyzed by polls. I always saw polls as sort of snapshots of what the American people knew, what they were thinking. And I used them to try to figure out what the best possible arguments I could make were to move the country where I thought we ought to go.

So I would expect any politician to use polls, but anybody who is imprisoned by a poll will in the end be defeated, because they're not good guideposts; they're pictures of horse races that are in progress.

Media Coverage

Mr. Knoller. I've got one last question that I think you'll find irresistible. In recent days, I've noticed you've accused us in the media of treating you with increasing irrelevancy. I'd like to ask you as you near the end of your Presidency, sir, what do you think of the news media coverage that you've been subjected to?

The President. Well, first of all, that's also been in just a good-natured jest. It is true that I'm on the way out. I mean, you can't—and so I've had a good time. But actually, you've given me unusually heavy coverage for this late in my term. But that's because we're continuing to do things; we're taking these actions like the environmental actions and the other things.

I think, on balance, the coverage has been—over an 8-year period, on balance—has been intense and fair in the sense that I have always had the chance to put my side out. I think that there are unusual pressures on the media today because there are more competitive outlets, and I think that the net effect of that is that sometimes a herd mentality takes over, and one person gets the story wrong, then everybody gets it wrong.

I think that the pressure for market share has aggravated the tendency which already exists, not only in our Capital but in every capital in the world, to elevate politics over policy and discord over working together.

So I think that—I also think that as the first post-baby-boomer President, and given the fact that I was involved in my youth in the controversies over Vietnam and a lot of other things, I think I became kind of a lightning rod—and Hillary did—for a lot of things that the system kind of had to work its way through. But I'd be at a poor position to have any profound complaints since I'm leaving office with pretty good approval ratings from the American people, and none of that would be possible if it hadn't been for the media through which I communicated my views and my side of all the controversies.

But I think that—I do think it's harder to get stories right, to avoid jumping the gun, to avoid kind of contributing to things that have a lot of heat and may not have much light, given the pressures that all of you are under today.

The last point I'd like to make, and I'm not pandering to you because you can't cover me much longer, is—[*laughter*]—but I believe this—I think it is a real mistake for people to generalize about the media. Very often there will be a big story in the national news, and ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, and CNN will all cover it differently.

So I think that you have to—I always had the feeling that you were more interested in policy than a lot of the people that covered me, but I think it's more because you've been here so long. I mean, I think you couldn't have hung around the way you have and done this if you weren't fascinated by politics. But in the end, you'd run dry if you didn't also

care about what the consequences to the country are. And like I said, you can't cover me much longer, so I'm not pandering to you, but I think—on the other hand, if you were here now—consider, suppose you were a 30-year-old, or however young you can be, 35-year-old television anchor, and you got the White House assignment, and you wanted to go further in life, and you were going to be judged partly by how hot you were on the screen and what your market share was, and you had to put this story together, and you had an hour to do it, you'd be under a whole different set of pressures, both in your work environment and in your head.

So I think that I would—that's one thing I would counsel any President to do, is not—fight paranoia about the press, and don't generalize about it.

I think both I and my wife's alleged aversion to the press has been way overblown. We've always been far more discriminating about the things with which we disagreed and the things with which we agreed.

Mr. Knoller. Mr. President, thank you so much, sir. It's been fascinating.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 2:35 p.m. in Dover High School for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to Usama bin Ladin, who allegedly sponsored the 1998 bombing attacks on the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania; Senator Christopher S. Bond; Ronnie L. White, whose nomination to be U.S. District Judge for the Eastern District of Missouri was defeated in October 1999; Gore 2000 campaign director William M. Daley; and former White House Chief of Staff Thomas F. (Mack) McLarty. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 15. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Exchange With Reporters at the Greenleaf Senior Center

January 15, 2001

[*The President's remarks are joined in progress.*]

Voters' Rights Legislation

The President. ——problems that are still out there that have to be—I believe should be addressed, and I hope they will be. But I think—looking at this in a positive frame of mind and hope to goodness that there will be a real common commitment that goes way beyond party interest.

Q. Are you encouraged, sir, by what you've seen so far?

The President. Now you guys know I'm not going to get into that. I'm on my way out the door, man; I shouldn't be talking about that. [*Laughter*] I just want to focus on the things that I said today and the message I sent to Congress. I think that there are a lot of problems. I hope that the President-elect will appoint a high-level election commission—I think it would be good to have former Presidents share it—to deal with all the voting rights issues that are out there. I hope that there will be something done on—some more done on the criminal justice system to give people of color, all racial and ethnic backgrounds, a sense that the system is more fair—and to make it more fair. And I gave some specific recommendations there. I'd really like to see some—I hope there will be some action on that.

President's Agenda for the Final Days

Q. Sir, more generally, going into your last week as President, what are your thoughts?

The President. That we've still got a few things to do.

Q. What are those things?

The President. We're working on—obviously, we're still involved in the talks on the Middle East. And we're working with Secretary Babbitt to try to finalize some more resource preservation action. And I have, as always happens at the end of a President's term, to see hundreds and hundreds and hundreds, literally, of requests for consideration for executive clemency of some kind or another for people who have been incarcerated or who are out and asked for pardons so they can get their voting rights back.

That's one thing I'd really like to see the Congress do. There's some legislation in Congress which would restore people's voting rights after they serve their sentences, and I think it would be a very good thing to pass.