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Situation in the Middle East

Trevor McDonald. Mr. President, the situation in the Middle East is desperate beyond words. How far are you prepared to go to resolve the crisis?

The President. Well, today, I gave a speech which shows my resolve to work with all parties concerned to try to achieve a lasting peace. On the one hand, I called upon the Arab world to fight to cut off the money, to stop this business about glorifying suicide bombers by calling them martyrs, to make sure that the press does encourage violence and killing and murder. And on the other hand, I said Israel has a right to defend herself—I fully understand that—but that it's time for her to withdraw from the occupied territory.

And the reason I feel that way is that I began to worry that the foundations necessary to achieve lasting peace were becoming eroded. In order for Israel to be able to exist, it requires the Arab world's willingness to encourage the conditions so that she can exist. And in order for there to be a Palestinian state, which I support, there needs to be the conditions so that a Palestinian state can exist. And those conditions were becoming eroded, so we acted strong.

I'm sending our very capable Secretary of State, Colin Powell, to the region. He goes there with the mandate of working with the leadership in that part of the world, as well as with the European Union and others, to implement what the U.N. resolution—a recent U.N. Resolution 1042, which lays out the steps necessary to eventually get to a political solution.

Mr. McDonald. But has this come a little late, Mr. President? The Secretary of State has been there before; the Vice President has been in the region; you've had General Zinni there.

The President. I thought my speech came right about the right time.

Mr. McDonald. But for so long now, for many, many days, if not weeks, people could see this situation spiraling rapidly out of control.

The President. Well, the problem is, you can't see the killers. You can't see the suicide bombers. And what we're trying to do is to rally the world to expose them and to expose those who are funding them and to say to Iran, "Stop it," and to Syria, "You must choose."

That's the problem. The invisible part of everything that you thought you could see, you can't see, which is killers who are going into Passover-type celebrations and killing people, killing innocent people. And we've got to stop that, Trevor; we just have to. In order for there to be peace, there must be—there must be a world effort to stop the suicide and the killers. Those people kill for one reason: to stop the peace, to stop a plan from coming into effect.

And this silly notion about somehow our Government hasn't been involved is just silly. I mean, we've had Zinni there, as you said, the Vice President's there. The Secretary of State has been there in the past; he's going back.

Mr. McDonald. So what is different this time?

The President. Well, this time hopefully there is a resolve. Hopefully, there's a resolve to the needless killing and the loss of innocent life that responsible citizens stand up and say, "Enough is enough." That's what I said today, "Enough is enough." And I believe that.

I'll tell you something else that is different. Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia laid out his initiative that essentially says the Arab world must recognize Israel's right to exist,

which was a significant change, and we've got to seize on that bold initiative.

Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority

Mr. McDonald. Will Secretary of State Colin Powell meet Yasser Arafat?

The President. I have no idea yet. I'll tell you what he is going to do. He's going to go work with the leadership to bring people together. My worry is, is that Yasser Arafat can't perform. He's been given plenty of opportunities.

Mr. McDonald. Has he forfeited your trust?

The President. He certainly hasn't earned it. Here's a man who said that he has signed onto Oslo, that he was going to fight off terror. We thought we had a cease-fire arranged. We were that close to a cease-fire, and the next thing we know, there's a suicide bomber that hits. We thought a couple of months ago that we thought we had an agreement. The next thing we know, he's ordered a shipment of arms from Iran.

Now, he's got a long way to go, and it starts with him proving that he can lead. He has let his people down, and there are others in the region who can lead and those who have called upon those others in the region to lead. And Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has taken a leadership role. President Mubarak of Egypt is a leader. King Abdullah of Jordan is a leader.

And so Colin Powell is going to go to the region to gather those leaders up and to start a process hopefully that will lead to lasting peace.

Mr. McDonald. You come pretty close to suggesting that Palestinians should look for another leader.

The President. It's up to them. Far be it from the American President to get to decide who leads what country. I'm just telling you since I've been the President, the man hasn't performed.

Situation in the Middle East

Mr. McDonald. Is there an emerging difference between the United States and Britain about how this should be solved?

The President. No, I don't think so.

Mr. McDonald. Let me tell you, the British Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, says sending in tanks to Ramallah and to Bethlehem is no response to suicide bombers. You seem to imply that anything should be done to counter terrorism. That's the difference.

The President. No, actually——

Mr. McDonald. And a significant one.

The President. I think I just told you that I asked for Israel to withdraw the cities which she now occupies, so the extent that that's what the Foreign Secretary says, that's fine. The man I talked to is Tony Blair, and I talked to him this morning and informed him about what I was going to say. And I gave him—he was the first foreign leader, by the way, I called to detail the speech that I delivered at 11 a.m. here in the U.S. And he was, one, appreciative of the phone call, it seemed like, and two, applauded what was going to be in the speech. He thought, at least—I hate to put words in somebody else's mouth, but from my perspective——

Mr. McDonald. [*Inaudible*]—that it was about time, did he——

The President. Those are your words, not his.

War on Terrorism

Mr. McDonald. Mr. President, turning to the war on terror, which you declared in the aftermath of the events of September 11th, hasn't it reached something of a stalemate?

The President. Is that a serious question?

Mr. McDonald. I meant it as a serious question.

The President. Well, it's not. Well, no. Of course, we haven't had a stalemate. We're winning. I mean, we just arrested a guy named Abu Zubaydah. We crushed the Taliban; they're no longer in office. We've got schools open for the first time in Afghanistan, where girls are going. For the first time, young girls are going to school. It's been a glorious series of victories, thanks to friends such as the British.

We've got a lot more work to do—don't get me wrong—but I don't think there's any stalemate to it.

Afghanistan

Mr. McDonald. At your request, the British are sending 1,700 more troops to Afghanistan. Is there a danger that they might become sucked into a never-ending commitment?

The President. No. No, it's not, because we've got a plan on how to get out. But first things first. We've got to find those Al Qaida killers and bring them to justice. What the world needs to know is there are still a lot of these murderers on the loose. And that's what they are. And anybody who thinks that we can rehabilitate them just simply doesn't know the nature of the enemy.

Usama bin Laden

Mr. McDonald. And their leaders—on the loose, too.

The President. Well, there's one less on the loose. And we don't know if Mr. bin Laden is on the loose. I don't know if you know, but I hadn't heard from him in the——

Mr. McDonald. I was hoping you would tell us what you think. Is bin Laden alive?

The President. I have no idea. But I'll tell you this: He's not making a lot of noise these days. And maybe he's dug in one of those holes, but there's not a hole deep enough. They're going to get him if he's still alive. And these people are killers, and that's the way we're going to treat them. They're international crooks, and we're going to hunt them down one by one.

I know there's a certain kind of anxiety amongst people in the press, for example, who want this thing over with tomorrow. But that's not the nature of this war. This is a different kind of war. This is a war that requires incredible patience and resolve. And make no mistake about it: I've got the patience and the resolve necessary to win, and so does my country. We're united in this effort, and we're going to do whatever it takes to rout out these terrorist organizations.

President Saddam Hussein of Iraq

Mr. McDonald. You've been very clear, Mr. President, turning to the question of Iraq, that it's part of an axis of evil, as I think you called it. When you meet Tony Blair in the coming days, will you be discussing the possibility of an attack on Iraq?

The President. I'll be talking a lot of things about Iraq with him, starting with the fact that we both recognize that Saddam Hussein is a dangerous man and he harbors and develops weapons of mass destruction—make no mistake about it—that he has got a variety of weapons that can harm mankind and he's not afraid to use them, including on his own people.

And so we'll be discussing that, and we'll be discussing all options. I have no immediate plans to conduct military operations. But as one of my closest friends, personal friends amongst the world leaders, and one of my Nation's closest allies, of course we're going to discuss all options.

Mr. McDonald. I take your point about no immediate plans, but in a sense, have you made up your mind that Iraq must be attacked?

The President. I made up my mind that Saddam needs to go. That's about all I'm willing to share with you.

Mr. McDonald. And you would take action to make sure that happens? And of course, if the logic of the war on terror means anything—which you have explained—then Saddam must go?

The President. That's what I just said. The policy of my Government is that he goes.

Mr. McDonald. People think that Saddam Hussein has had no links with the Al Qaida network, and I'm wondering why you have——

The President. The worst thing that could happen would be to allow a nation like Iraq, run by Saddam Hussein, to develop weapons of mass destruction and then team up with terrorist organizations so they can blackmail the world. I'm not going to let that happen.

Mr. McDonald. So you're going to go after him?

The President. As I told you, the policy of my Government is that Saddam Hussein not be in power.

Mr. McDonald. And how are you going to achieve this, Mr. President?

The President. Wait and see.

Mr. McDonald. Do you think that the international coalition, which you—which an administration once assembled for the Gulf

war, when Kuwait was invaded and the aggressors were undoubtedly the Iraqis—do you think that that international coalition can be assembled again for another attack on Iraq?

The President. I think the coalition can be assembled to demand that Iraq let inspectors back in, like she agreed to do right after the Gulf war. I don't know why the man won't let inspectors in. He's probably got something to hide, don't you think?

And the idea of having this man, who is willing to murder his own people, have weapons of mass destruction—I'm not going to let that happen, and neither will the free world. So I'm confident that we can lead a coalition to pressure Saddam Hussein and to deal with Saddam Hussein.

Mr. McDonald. You say you are confident about this coalition. Certainly, Britain, there are grave misgivings about it. And Tony Blair is under pressure within his own party: 51 percent of the British people think, in an opinion poll, that Saddam Hussein should not be attacked at this time. How are you going to do that? How are you going to accomplish that?

The President. How am I going to change the minds of Britain?

Mr. McDonald. And a number of European countries, too.

The President. Well, we'll just watch and see what happens. I'm going to work closely with our friends and consult with our friends, like I am doing.

One thing Tony Blair does understand is that Saddam Hussein is a dangerous person. And I admire his courage for speaking the truth, and he speaks clearly about the truth. And that's one of the reasons why I like his advice and treasure his counsel.

Mr. McDonald. So what you are calling on Saddam Hussein to do is to let the inspectors back in——

The President. Yes, of course. That's what he said he would do.

Mr. McDonald. And that's the way he can avoid——

The President. But this is not an issue of inspectors. This is an issue of him upholding his word that he would not develop weapons of mass destruction.

Mr. McDonald. So whether he allows the inspectors in or not, he is on the list to be attacked; he's the next target?

The President. You keep trying to put—you're one these clever reporters that keeps trying to put words in my mouth.

Mr. McDonald. Far from that, Mr. President.

The President. Well, I'm afraid you do, sir. But nevertheless, you've had my answer on this subject. And I have no plans to attack on my desk. A policy of my Government is for Saddam not to be in office. It's in the interests of the free world that he not be in office, and it's in the interests of the free world that he not be allowed to develop weapons of mass destruction. And the first thing is he must show us whether or not he has weapons of mass destruction, just like he promised he would do.

Mr. McDonald. And you will have to build the job of the coalition to make sure that this——

The President. We've got a vast coalition for freedom right now. And I talk to leaders all the time, and of course, the subject of Iraq, amongst other subjects, comes up. And I explained to them precisely what I'm explaining to you. And most people understand that history has called us into action. History has given us an opportunity to fight for freedom, and we all will fight for freedom.

Situation in the Middle East

Mr. McDonald. Mr. President, to really put your stamp on a solution in the Middle East—which will help in other ways in fighting this war against terror, as you, yourself, have said—might you be willing to convene a summit to get both sides together and to discuss these problems and to try to resolve these?

The President. Well, we've tried summits in the past, as you may remember. There wasn't one all that long ago where a summit was called and nothing happened, and as a result we had a significant *intifada* in the area.

The only time that's appropriate for a U.S. President to call a summit, when it looks like something can get done. And in the meantime, the Secretary of State is very much involved in the Middle East. And I don't know

if you want to call it a summit, but he's going to have meetings with leaders, attempting to get in place Resolution 1042, which the Security Council has agreed to, which will lead to a political settlement—if all the parties participate.

Mr. McDonald. Mr. President, thank you, sir.

The President. You're welcome. Glad you're here.

Mr. McDonald. Thank you, sir.

[*At this point, the network took a commercial break.*]

Pressures of the Presidency

Mr. McDonald. How do you cope with the pressures——

The President. Well, I'm a man—I believe in prayer. I believe in exercise. I've got a great wife; balance, as they say. Obviously, I'm reminded of what's important in life. We've got a fabulous team. We've got one of the great administrations in American history, and it gives me great comfort to know that the advice I get is honest, straightforward advice from very experienced people.

Aftermath of September 11

Mr. McDonald. Has anything surprised you about the pressures, having these crises—have there been any surprises since you came into the Oval Office?

The President. I think the surprise was how clearly I saw what we needed to do after 9/11. I shouldn't say surprised, I guess. Pleased with how clearly I saw things. I was obviously emotional, but I knew what the country needed to do. And I was really pleased with the way the country responded.

Mr. McDonald. How do you think America has changed after those terrible events of September the 11th?

The President. Well, I think a lot of people are now taking an assessment about what's important in life. I hope moms and dads are saying, "What can I do to be better mother or father?" I know a lot of my fellow Americans have asked, "What can we do to help fight on the war against terror?" And I answer by saying, "Love somebody. Be a good neighbor. Help some kid who just wonders whether the American experience is meant for them, or teach somebody how to read." In other words, there's a lot of small acts that help define the face of America, which really do contribute to standing up against evil.

You've probably heard me speak. I truly believe that this is a fight against evil. These killers are evil people. They've hijacked a religion, and they want to commit murder in order to justify the goals and the ambitions of a few people.

Mr. McDonald. You understand that there are, sort of, different perceptions about this? For example, I heard after you made your latest speech about the crisis in the Middle East, a Palestinian spokesman said, "Yes, but we also live under the terrorism of occupation." Do you understand that?

The President. Sure, people have—look, my job isn't to try to nuance. My job is to tell people what I think. And when I think there's an axis of evil, I say it. I think moral clarity is important, if you believe in freedom. And people can make all kinds of excuses, but there are some truths involved.

And one of the truths is, they're sending suicide killers in—because they hate Israel. That's a truth. And you can justify it any way you want, but nevertheless, the role of the President, as far as I'm concerned, is to stand up and tell the truth, and I did today. I made it as plain as I could. I try to speak as plainly as I can. I know people don't like it when I say there's evil; this is evil versus good. But that's not going to stop me from saying what I think is right.

Situation in the Middle East

Mr. McDonald. Your Palestinian interlocutors will say that they—you have to balance that against the fact that they live, as they say, under this occupation. They also have increasing settlements. And there is a kind of tyranny, they say, they would claim——

The President. Well, in my speech today, I recognized that they need to stop the building of settlements. And it is my Government that laid out the Tenet, and then the Mitchell plans, which both sides agreed to, which will lead to peace. The problem is, they haven't lived up to the agreement. And I'm calling

on the Palestinians to live up to the agreement. And I'm calling on the Israelis to pull out of the occupied territory, the places, the cities they've occupied recently, trying to set up a situation where we can achieve peace. That's what I want. I want peace. And I believe it can happen, otherwise I wouldn't be working so hard on it. I'm an optimist. As you can see, the way we've got the Oval Office here designed, it's open, and it's optimistic, and it's sunny. That's what I feel about life.

It was right in this room where Vladimir Putin came in, and I had a fantastic meeting with him here. Finally, we're getting rid of the cold war, where we hated each other. You know, if you'd been sitting in the fifties, saying, "Can you ever imagine a U.S. President and a Russian President sitting here and talking like friends," you'd have said, "Of course not. How farfetched is that?"

That's what I used as an example today as what is possible in the Middle East. And I think it is possible. All of us are going to have to work to achieve that goal.

Possibility of a Peace Summit

Mr. McDonald. But you're not very much into, sort of, big, set peace summits to do that?

The President. Well, he'd better—the problem is, the American President, when he calls a summit, better get it right.

Mr. McDonald. He puts his personal reputation on the line.

The President. This doesn't have nothing to do with reputation. It has everything to do with the consequences if it fails. It's not the President—see, that's the problem. It's not all about the person. It's about the people who live in the region. If a summit fails, if the President puts—lays it out there and nothing happens, generally the status—the followup is worse than the status quo.

And that's what Presidents must understand. We're dealing with people's lives and expectations. And I think there's a better way to achieve what we want, is peace. Someday that may happen, don't get me wrong. Someday you may say, "I remember when I talked to old Bush, and there he is, sitting there with a big summit." But now is not the time for one. I've got a different strategy.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 3:07 p.m. in the Library at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East Gen. Anthony Zinni, USMC (Ret.); President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt; King Abdullah II of Jordan; Prime Minister Tony Blair and Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Jack Straw of the United Kingdom; Abu Zubaydah and Usama bin Laden, leaders of the Al Qaida terrorist organization; and President Vladimir Putin of Russia. The President also referred to the Tenet plan, the Israeli-Palestinian cease-fire and security plan of June 13, 2001, negotiated by Director of Central Intelligence George J. Tenet; and the Mitchell report, the Report of the Sharm el-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee, issued April 30, 2001. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

The President's Radio Address

April 6, 2002

Good morning. This weekend, Laura and I are hosting the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and his family at our ranch in Crawford, Texas. America has no better ally in our war against terrorism than Great Britain.

Six months ago, when the United States launched military strikes against Al Qaida training camps and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, British forces were right by our side. And the success of Operation Enduring Freedom owes much to the strong support from allies like Great Britain. Yet, the war against terrorism is far from over. It will continue in Afghanistan and beyond.

The world has been brutally reminded these past 2 weeks of the price exacted by terror. Prime Minister Blair and I will spend much of our time this weekend discussing the tragic outbreak of violence in the Middle East. Across the world, people are grieving for Israelis and Palestinians who have lost their lives.

When an 18-year-old Palestinian girl is induced to blow herself up and in the process kills a 17-year-old Israeli girl, the future itself is dying—the future of the Palestinian people and the future of the Israeli people. The United States is strongly committed to finding a just settlement in the Middle East. That