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Interview With David Speers of Sky News

August 30, 2007

Australia's Role in the War on Terror

Mr. Speers. Mr. President, the United States has around 160,000 troops in Iraq at the moment. Australia has, in its battle group, only around 500 in the relatively safe Dhi Qar Province. Is this just a symbolic contribution? Would it really matter if they were brought home?

The President. First, I want to thank the Howard Government and the people of Australia for joining this global struggle against extremists and radicals who are trying to impose their vision on the world. And that struggle is found—being played out in Iraq and Afghanistan right now and other places.

And so I view Australia's contribution to peace and freedom as more than just Iraq. I view it as, one, a strategic partnership with the United States. I view their contribution as intelligence contributions. But I also understand that there's a commitment to helping people live in freedom as a long-term solution to this ideological struggle.

And I'm often asked about coalition troops. And my attitude is, our coalition partners ought to be making decisions based upon conditions on the ground, because failure in Iraq would lead to, in my judgment, to turmoil, chaos in the Middle East, and other attacks on the United States and other nations. Success will be a major blow to these radicals and extremists that will make it easier for us to say we've done our duty and laid the foundation for peace.

Leader of the Opposition Kevin Rudd of Australia/War on Terror

Mr. Speers. Well, as you know, there's an election only 2 or 3 months away in Australia, and Kevin Rudd, the Opposition Leader, is ahead in all of the polls. And he has promised to pull those combat troops out of Iraq if he wins. He says he'll consult with the U.S. So, if he does win, what would you be saying to him? Would you be trying to convince him not to do that?

The President. Well, actually, I believe he's on my calendar. I, of course, will be meeting with the Prime Minister, and then I'll be meeting with Mr. Rudd, and I'm looking forward to it. He doesn't know me, and I don't know him. And so I look forward to sharing my views and would ask, if he were to win, that he consider conditions on the ground before making any decisions; that what matters is success. And I believe we can be successful. And I know it's important to be successful. And I will be glad to explain to him why I'm optimistic that this hard work will achieve what we all want, which is, over time, fewer troops and peace. The main thing we want is to make sure that we deal these radicals and extremists a major blow, which is success in Iraq.

See, here's the interesting thing that I hope the people of Australia understand: There are two forms of extremism that have now converged on Iraq. One is Sunni extremism in the likes of Al Qaida. These people in Iraq swore allegiance to the very same person that ordered the attack on the United States of America. Sunni extremists have killed Australians. Sunni extremists that are inspired by this ideology are killing around the world.

And then there's the strain of Shiism extremism that is fostered by Iran. And these are the two major threats to world peace, and they've converged on Iraq, which should say that we need to do the hard work necessary so we can have peace in the long term for children growing up both in the United States and Australia.

War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq

Mr. Speers. So you need those Australian troops there.

The President. We need all our coalition partners. And I would hope that—and I understand, look, everybody has got their own internal politics. My only point is, is that whether it be Afghanistan or Iraq, we've got more work to do. We, the free world, has got more work to do. And I believe those of us who live in liberty have a responsibility to promote forms of government that deal with what causes 19 kids to get on airplanes to kill 3,000 students [citizens]. *

* White House correction.

United Kingdom's Role in Iraq

Mr. Speers. What, then, do you say about the British withdrawing significant numbers from southern Iraq in what many of your officers say is still a dangerous zone of the country?

The President. Well, I've talked to—I've said the exact same thing to Gordon Brown: Make sure you're dictated by conditions on the ground. And he—listen, that's exactly what he said he's going to do.

Mr. Speers. So that's not premature, that British withdrawal.

The President. Well, he said that he's going to make decisions based upon conditions. And by the way, the Brits are going to keep a presence. When you say "withdraw," it makes it sound like all their troops are coming home, but that's not what's going to happen.

Mr. Speers. But a significant number of them are.

The President. Well, you know, he will let me know when he makes that decision. He has said that he is going to make decisions in southern Iraq based upon conditions. They're now moved out of the Basra Palace into an air base, which is fine. But they will have a presence there to help this Iraqi Government succeed.

Australian Elections/Australia-U.S. Relations

Mr. Speers. You've had a very close relationship with John Howard. You famously called him the "man of steel." If he doesn't win the election, and Kevin Rudd does become Prime Minister, given that you have differences over such a big issue as Iraq, will the alliance still be the same? Will the relationship be the same?

The President. I refuse to accept your hypothesis.

Mr. Speers. If he wins.

The President. Well, that's if. You're asking me to answer a hypothetical.

Mr. Speers. But will the alliance change?

The President. All I can tell you is, is that I remember John Howard has been behind in polls before and he's won. And so certainly, I'm not going to prejudge the decision of the Australian people. And I will end up dealing with whomever and work hard to make sure that the Australian and U.S. relationship is good. But I don't buy into your hypothesis.

Mr. Speers. But essentially, the relationship won't suffer if Kevin Rudd becomes Prime Minister?

The President. Look, I'll be glad to deal with the situation. See, that's a loaded question. In this sense, you're trying to get me to predict the outcome of the election, and I'm not going to do it. I don't know enough about it, and I am going down there to deal with the current Prime Minister, who, no doubt about it, is a close personal friend of mine. And I think a man—he is a man of steel, because he's a person who stands on conviction and principle. I don't know Mr. Rudd; I'm looking forward to getting to know him. But that's all I really want to comment about your elections.

Mr. Speers. A lot of Australians will be weighing out, what's going to happen to the alliance if Labor wins the election?

The President. Yes, as I said, I really am not going to get involved in your election down there. I am going to be—I'm going down as the U.S. President, proud of the relationship between the United States and Australia. It is a relationship based upon our common values; it's a relationship based upon good economic ties; and it's a really important relationship. And I presume whoever the U.S. President is after me and the Prime Ministers to come in Australia will understand how important that is.

China

Mr. Speers. Labor also wants the alliance to focus more on China and its military build-up in particular, its nuclear arms stocks. Should more attention be given to that and China's tensions with Japan?

The President. Well, we spend a lot of time on China in this administration. I've got good relations with both the Japanese and Chinese leadership. My view is, is that it's important for there to be an active U.S. presence in Asia, precisely to make sure that old tensions don't flare up.

And I'm pleased with the progress that's being made in Asia. And obviously, the interesting relationship now in Asia is the trading relationship. Australia, fortunately, has got a surplus with China. And America, however, has got a major deficit with China.

Mr. Speers. Does the military issue concern you?

The President. It only concerns me if there's hostility. In other words, it only concerns me if the Government declares its hostility toward the world. I happen to believe that China's most important issue internally is for them to grow their economy to deal with—they've got to create, like, 25 million new jobs a year in order to stay even, in order to keep their economy growing. And so therefore, my view of China is that they're internally focused to the extent that they want economic growth and vitality; they're externally focused in order to get the raw materials they need. But if they ever turn hostile, I would be concerned about, you know, a military——

President's Upcoming Visit to Australia

Mr. Speers. Mr. President, just finally, a lot of Sydneysiders are complaining about the impost of APEC, in particular your security detail and how that will affect the city for a week while you're there, almost a week while you're there. Do you have any message for them?

The President. Well, first I'm looking forward to coming to the beautiful city, and to the extent that I inconvenience them, I apologize. I'm not exactly sure what you're talking about, in terms of——

Mr. Speers. The security lockdown in the city.

The President. It's the first—thank you for sharing that with me. I got a lot on my mind, and one of the things that's one [on] * my mind is I'm looking forward to coming to one of the most beautiful cities in the world. If I inconvenience people, that's not my intent. My intent is to represent my country in an important meeting in a country that I admire a lot and a country with whom we've got great relations. And it's important that we continue to have great relations.

I hope people—I hope people understand why it's done, and I just hope it doesn't disrupt their lives too much.

Mr. Speers. Mr. President, we do look forward to seeing you in Sydney. Thank you very much for your time.

The President. I'm looking forward to it. Thank you for your time.

Mr. Speers. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 3:39 p.m. in the Map Room at the White House for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to Prime Minister John Howard of Australia; and Prime Minister Gordon Brown of the United Kingdom. This transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on August 31. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Interview With Kensuke Okoshi of NHK Japan

August 30, 2007

Japan-U.S. Relations/Japan's Antiterrorism Law

Mr. Okoshi. Thank you, Mr. President. My first question is on the U.S.-Japan alliance. It has been said that relationship between our two countries grew closer than ever before under your leadership. On the other hand, in Japan, the opposition party blocked the extension of the antiterrorism special law, which can be seen as a symbol of the U.S.-Japan alliance. How serious do you think this is?

The President. First of all, we do have a good relationship with Japan, and it's an important relationship. The relationship between the United States and Japan is good for the American people; I believe it's good for the Japanese people; and I believe it's good for stability in not only Southeast Asia but where we cooperate in other parts of the world. And so therefore, I would hope that the Government would keep this important law in place so that Japan and the United States and other nations can continue to work for peace and stability. And it's an important piece of legislation, as far as we're concerned.

President's Meeting With Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan

Mr. Okoshi. Will you talk about this issue, about the extension of the antiterrorism special law with Prime Minister Abe at the next meeting in Sydney?

* White House correction.