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Interview With Master Sergeant Erin Roberts of the Pentagon Channel

March 19, 2008

M. Sgt. Roberts. Sir, I want to thank you for this opportunity that you've given us to talk to you.

The President. My honor.

Progress in Iraq

M. Sgt. Roberts. Today is the fifth-year anniversary of U.S. military presence in Iraq. And my first question for you would be, as Commander in Chief, what are the areas you are most focused on, and most proud of, as U.S. forces and the Iraqi forces continue to work towards stability and security in Iraq?

The President. I'm most proud of the performance of our troops. We have asked a lot of our military and the military families. We've got men and women who have been to both theaters in the war on terror, multiple times. And that's a strain, and it's hard. And I understand it is. On the other hand, our troops know it's necessary.

I am focused on making sure that we do not allow the sacrifice that has gone over the last 5 years to go in vain; that we end up making the hard decisions now, and helping the Iraqis now to develop a peaceful and free society in the heart of the Middle East, which will enable the next generation's children to grow up in a peaceful world—or the next generation to grow up in a peaceful world.

And so I'm pleased with the progress. It's been hard; it's been really hard. It's been hard on our country. It's been hard on the military, but I'm proud of the fact that the military has been so steadfast and courageous.

Wounded Military Personnel/Military Families

M. Sgt. Roberts. Speaking of the military and their families, you meet with many family members, many spouses, on a regular basis, of those that are lost and wounded in the conflicts—difficult situation, I'm sure. Could you take a moment and just tell us what it's like meeting with them and what you say to them and what they say to you?

The President. Sure. First of all, obviously, each circumstance is a little different—and you're right, I've met with a lot. Let me first start with the wounded. Generally what happens is, is that, in a place like Walter Reed or Bethesda, you know, a soldier will look at their Commander in Chief and say, "I can't wait to get back in the battle," which obviously—you know, first of all, it's just so inspiring to me, but it also—it's got to change the perspective of their family a little bit.

Secondly, with the wounded, I am obviously always conscious to make sure that these kids, these soldiers—people in uniform—get the best care. And I truly believe they are. And I love our doctors and nurses. It's unbelievable the care they get.

In terms of meeting with the families of the deceased—as you can imagine, it's very emotional. First of all, meeting the President alone can be an emotional experience, and when you put on top of that the Commander in Chief who made the decision of—that got their child in a position where he or she got killed, so, you know, the meetings can be very tearful. I'm a crier, at times. I'm not afraid to hug a mom or hug a wife or hug a husband and cry.

I try to get them to talk about their loved one. I want to learn about each individual person who sacrificed—what they were like, what their interests were—and a lot of times the families love sharing their stories with the Commander in Chief. And to a person, nearly, I have been told that, "Whatever you do, Mr. President, complete this job." Don't—and basically what they're saying is, "Don't let politics, don't let the Gallup poll, don't let a focus group cause you to make a decision that is not in the best interests of our country and our military." And I assure them that they don't have to worry about that about George W. Bush.

I tell my friends who ask me this question a lot, what—they say, "What's it like? You're the guy who made the decision to put their loved one in harm's way. They didn't come home. What's it like to meet with them?" And I say that oftentimes the comforter in chief is the person who gets comforted, because of the strength and courage and great love of country of these folks.

Progress in Afghanistan

M. Sgt. Roberts. Let's move to Afghanistan. It's been 6½ years——

The President. Right.

M. Sgt. Roberts. ——since we forced the Taliban out of power over there. What do you see the current situation for our troops right now, and how much work do you think needs to be done to sustain the progress that we've made?

The President. Afghanistan obviously is different from Iraq. Afghanistan—I mean, Iraq is a wealthier nation. Afghanistan is broke, and they had a long way to go and—from the days of the Taliban, and, you know, they have made interesting progress. I'm going to get some of these statistics a little wrong, but the point I want to make is that infrastructures change. I mean, it's—I think there was like less than 100 miles of roads, and today, there's over 1,000 miles of road. Young girls weren't going to school, basically, and now there's a lot of young girls going to school. Health care was very rudimentary, and today, a lot of people have got basic health care. In other words, the condition—human condition is changing, which is important.

The Taliban has not been defeated. In other words, they keep coming back. And an enemy such as this gets defeated when two things happen: One, you know, we bring their people to justice, as well as a society develops which marginalizes them—in other words, something that competes with their ideology. Everybody in Afghanistan knows what the Taliban's ideology is like. They had to live under them. And now that—we're trying to help them realize there's another way and a more hopeful life. And until a—you know, a civil society develops that provides hope for the Afghan people, it's going to be—the Taliban will be a factor.

And so they're a factor now. Are they winning? No; they're not winning. Can they beat us militarily? Absolutely not. And so a lot of what—and we're bolstering our troops there, by the way, just to make sure that they're not able to intimidate the people to the point where a civil society and a free society can't develop.

So we've got work to do there. The good news is we're not there in alone. There's a lot of NATO troops—some of whom fight, some of whom don't fight, but all of whom make a contribution. And I'm going to NATO next week and—the NATO meeting in Romania. And I'll of course be urging our allies to bolster their presence in Afghanistan because—and I'll remind them that this was the country that had failed so miserably, that not only were people brutalized but an enemy that hates America and hates free societies developed safe havens from which they launch brutal attack.

And now is the time to deal with them and not hope they change their mind or hope they become better citizens of the world, because they're not.

U.S. Africa Command

M. Sgt. Roberts. Africa——

The President. Yes.

M. Sgt. Roberts. ——the new Africa Command; you just were on a trip to five countries in Africa. Tell me, if you can, briefly, the significance of Africa Command, and—strategically and how it will play in the global war on terror.

The President. Well, first of all, there's some nervousness about the African command in Africa because nations don't want U.S. troops stationed on their border. And so I had to spend time saying, wait a minute, this isn't a typical command. What this is, is a command that will help Africans deal with African problems, such as Sudan. We want well-trained African troops going into places like Sudan, helping the poor folks there who are being brutalized by, you know, thugs, to be able to survive and thrive.

And—first of all, this administration recognizes that Africa is important. That's why we name an African command. Secondly, that hopelessness is the only way radicals can recruit, and therefore, we have programs to, you know, deal with malaria and HIV/AIDS and hunger. But the other source of instability on the continent of Africa is civil unrest, is civil war, is, you know, inflamed passions that break out into violence. And it's in our interests that we help Africans deal with those problems. That's what Africa Command is meant to do.

And so it fits into the broader scope of things, the broader war on terror, and also

is a—it's a commitment that we care about the people on the continent of Africa.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 1:37 p.m. in the Map Room at the White House and was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on March 20.

Remarks on the National President's Challenge

March 20, 2008

Thank you, all. Please be seated. I'm honored to be joined by members of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. And today I've got an announcement to make as to how to encourage our fellow citizens to exercise more.

First, I do want to thank the Chairman of this Council, John Burke. His business is to make mountain bikes, Trek mountain bikes. [*Laughter*] I use Trek mountain bikes. [*Laughter*] That's not why he's the Chairman. [*Laughter*] But I like to exercise a lot. And I hope my fellow citizens learn to love exercise as well. It's good for your mind; exercise is good for your body; and it's good for your soul. If you ride mountain bikes, make sure you keep your eyes on the road—[*laughter*]—because sometimes you can go over the handlebars—[*laughter*]—which I have done.

I want to thank the members of the Council for their good work to promote physical fitness. I believe physical fitness is a vital issue for our country. Nearly two-thirds of American adults are overweight or obese. That's too many. More than half of American adults do not get enough physical activity to realize the health benefits. Not enough people are exercising. The benefits include lower risk for many serious conditions, ranging from heart disease to diabetes to depression.

America's young people are three times more likely to be overweight than they were three decades ago. Lack of physical fitness places a huge financial burden on our Nation. Diseases linked to unhealthy habits drive up the price of health care for all Americans.

So we're encouraging Americans to take personal responsibility for their own health. And one way we're doing so is through the HealthierUS Initiative. Now this is an initiative I announced in 2002. And the key—program had key four components.

First, be physically active every day. People say, "I don't have time to be physically active every day." Well, my suggestion is, make time. Secondly, eat well. Thirdly, get preventive screenings. And fourthly, you know, don't do stupid things to your body—like drugs and tobacco and excessive alcohol.

Today we're unveiling a new way to encourage people across the United States to boost their physical activity, and to have some fun doing it. It's called the National President's Challenge. I appreciate very much the Acting Surgeon General Steve Galson is with us, and the person who went to the Press Club and kind of lent a little extra stuff to the announcement, and that would be Eli Manning. You know, he helped kick off this initiative, and he probably thought he'd be—not having to deal with kickoffs anytime after the Super Bowl. [*Laughter*] But I want to thank you all very much for helping to highlight an interesting and exciting and a fun way for people to realize the benefits of physical activity.

So here's how it works. First, you can go online at www.presidentschallenge.org—www.presidentschallenge.com—and you can sign up to participate. You can sign up as an individual, or you can sign up as a group, which would be kind of a fun way to work out together. The deadline, by the way, for signing up is April the third. So get on your web page there and sign up.

Secondly, you get to decide how you're going to meet your physical fitness goal. In other words, you set a goal, and then you pick the exercise or activity. And there's about 100 different activities to choose from, ranging from gardening or skydiving. [*Laughter*] So I suspect my father will be signing up for skydiving. [*Laughter*] Mother wants him to sign up for gardening. [*Laughter*]

Thirdly, start exercising. If you're an adult—and that means 30 minutes of activity a day, 5 days a week; or if you're a kid, 60 minutes. That's—it's not that hard to do if you prioritize and discipline yourself. You've got 6 weeks of activity to meet the challenge—in other words, this ends on May the 15th.