



THE WHITE HOUSE
PRESIDENT
GEORGE W. BUSH

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Interview of the President by Pentagon Channel/AFN

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

THE PRESIDENT: It's my honor.

Q Today is the fifth-year anniversary of the 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 five 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.

Q 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 -- a 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, a soldier will look at their Commander-in-Chief and say, I can't wait to get back in the battle, which obviously -- first of all, it's just so inspiring to me, but also has 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 that ask me this question a lot, 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.

Q Okay. Let's move to Afghanistan. It's been six-and-a-half years since we forced the Taliban out of power over there. How 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 have a long way to go from the days of the Taliban. And 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 a hundred miles of roads, and today there's over a thousand 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, 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 we're trying to help them realize there's another way and a more hopeful life. And until 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 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 alone. There's a lot of NATO troops -- some of whom fight, some of whom don't fight, but all of them make a contribution. And I'm going to NATO next week in -- 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 a 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 attacks.

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.

Q Africa -- 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, 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 thugs, to be able to survive and thrive.

First of all, this administration recognizes that Africa is important. That's why we named an African command. Secondly, that hopelessness is the only way radicals can recruit, and therefore we have programs to 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 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.

Q Okay. Well, fantastic. I thank you very much, sir.

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