



# The White House

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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For Immediate Release  
Office of the Press Secretary  
November 21, 2003

## Interview of the President by Al-Sharq Al-Awsat

The American Embassy  
London, England  
November 19, 2003

2:50 P.M. (Local)

Q I know you are the busiest person --

THE PRESIDENT: Thanks for coming by. I appreciate your interest. I'm honored you'd come by.

Q Mr. President, I think the question, number one, I have to ask is, now you're talking about transferring the power from the coalition now to the Governing Council sometime in the summer. What is exactly your timetable for that?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it really depends upon the Governing Coalition. They've expressed a desire for the transfer of authority in June. There are certain benchmarks that must be achieved. But let me just give you a kind of a broader assessment.

We -- Ambassador Bremer came to the United States, as you know, gosh, I think it must have been a week ago or 10 days ago. And we sat down and made a conscious decision to listen to the voices on the Governing Council that were interested in accelerating the transfer of sovereignty, and we decided to -- obviously if that's what they're interested in, that we needed to assess whether or not it was possible. The assessment was positive. And therefore, Jerry Bremer went back to the Governing Council and worked out a timetable that they're comfortable with. And that's very important.

As you know, one of the -- initially the thought was to have a constitution written, then elections, then sovereignty. It was going to take a while to write the constitution, because there was a sentiment amongst the people that there needed to be elections to a constitutional assembly. And yet, because certain things had happened, the transfer of sovereignty seemed more realistic at this point in time than it did initially. And I could cite some of those in a minute. And so the idea was to have kind of a standard law under which the Iraqi people would operate, transfer of sovereignty, and then a constitution be written.

And as you know, the Governing Council is now in the process of -- you asked the timetable -- one of the decisions they must make is what will be the form of the kind of the local elections or caucuses that will then determine the makeup of the initial kind of representative body. That's their decision. And it's important for me to emphasize "their" decision, because we believe -- and still believe -- believed and believe that the Iraqi people are plenty capable of running their own country, a free country.

Q But who are we going to hand it over to -- let's say, if you start in the summer, are we saying the summer is accurate?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I think so. That's exactly what we're aiming for now.

Q Who is going to go for without, of course, the constitution, without a --

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THE PRESIDENT: Well, there's going to be kind of a general law that will be agreed upon before by the Governing Council so that people know that their rights will not be trampled, that there will be -- that the minority populations will have a voice in the future government. In other words, there has to be something other than a constitution because the constitution it looked like was going to take a long time to write -- but something that would have basic rights guaranteed, a preceding document to what eventually will be the constitution. And so that's part of what the Governing Council agreed to do.

Q But your vision, you think it's going to be one person, a president would be --

THE PRESIDENT: My vision doesn't matter. That's important for you and your readers to know. What matters is the vision of the Iraqi people. And I've said in my speeches that I believe in democracy, but I recognize that democracy can come in different forms and democracies will not look like America's democracy necessarily. So there's ways to get to a system in which minority rights are represented, a rule of law prevails, all the systems inherent in democratic form. And they come in different ways, as you know. In particular in the Middle East, or throughout the Arab world.

In my speech today, which I don't know if you heard it or not --

Q Not yet.

THE PRESIDENT: You've got to hear it -- please.

Q I will, indeed.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, because it's important for you to hear because I think it gives you some insights into my thinking in my heart about the Arab people and the Muslim people. I said in my speech, there are -- I said one of the things that the Western world has to do is change its way of thinking about the Muslim world, or the Arab world. And that is that -- some will say, oh, these kind of people can't manage, can't govern themselves. I completely disagree. And one of the points I point out is that half the Muslims live under democratic societies and they're contributing citizens. And those societies have got different ways of dealing with democracy. And Iraq's democracy will emerge in a uniquely Iraqi fashion. And that's what I'm trying to say.

Q So we don't know in the summer it's one president or a governing council, elected --

THE PRESIDENT: And that's fine. Because a system is emerging. And that's what's important to know. But the Iraqi Governing Council, the Iraqi people will make that decision.

Q Are we saying -- will that follow by withdrawing troops, American troops from --

THE PRESIDENT: No -- two separate courses. I'm sorry to interrupt you, I'm anticipating your questions, in the name of time.

Q No, that's the question --

THE PRESIDENT: We're talking two separate tracks. The political track is developing and it's developing well, because certain things didn't happen. One, there was no great huge refugee flows. Two, there wasn't the sectarian violence. Remember, these were all -- some of the predictions. I'm not suggesting you were making these predictions, but others might have been making predictions about sectarian violence. You remember that prediction. Or refugee flows. Or hunger -- food shortages throughout the country. And none of that happened.

But, obviously, what is happening is violence that we're dealing with, and that's a security issue. But the political process is moving forward. And the ministries are now being staffed. There is a local region -- local governments up and running. There's a variety of indicators that the system is moving toward this democratic transition, which the Governing Council recognizes and supports. So that's happening.

The other track, of course, is the security track. They're not mutually exclusive, of course. But in terms of our participation, we will stay until Iraq is allowed to emerge as a free society, which we know will happen.

Let me give you kind of the strategy. See, I said in my speech today, the Iraqi people will not reject freedom, and I believe that. And one way that they will protect their freedoms is to develop the forces necessary, internally, to work with coalition forces to deal with the few that are trying to destroy the hopes of the many. And I think we have over 130,000 now, Iraqis, in one kind of uniform or another. That would be your border guards, your facilities protection services, the police. And we've got a battalion in the army, and we're growing the army. I think they think it will be up around 30,000 by the end of next year, a trained, capable Iraqi army. And the first task, of course, for these uniformed Iraqi personnel is to rout out the killers, people willing to destroy.

I had a very interesting meeting -- I'm sure you read about the 17 Iraqi women who came, that came to the White House. It was really, really interesting; a hopeful meeting, very capable women, anxious for a free society to emerge. And one lady made it clear to me that, yes, you've lost people, but we've lost a lot. And the Iraqi people are suffering and are dying, because people are trying to terrorize their society by killing them. And the Iraqi people will reject this because they yearn for freedom, just like you yearn for freedom and I yearn for freedom.

Q Mr. President, am I getting this right, you will not have any withdrawal of any troops by the summer?

THE PRESIDENT: No. We will have troops on the ground that will match the security needs, is the best way to put that.

Q So you're not saying more or less?

THE PRESIDENT: I'm saying I'm going to listen to the generals who say, Mr. President, we've got -- we need more, we need less, we've got exactly the right number. They will tell me the number. Their job is to secure -- is to work with the Iraqis to deal with the terrorists. And there are the Baathist terrorists, there Jihadists, there are al Qaeda-types, Ansar Islam-types. And their job is to help the Iraqis secure their country, and they assess all the time, the commanders, and they say, we need this number here, we need that number here. And it's their decision to make. I set the goal; they decide the tactics.

So General Abizaid -- if you want to know what the troop strength will look like in June, go find General Abizaid and he'll tell you.

Q Are we saying that you are doing the transfer of power earlier than planned because the pressure, because of the loss of life, the French, everybody --

THE PRESIDENT: No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Because what I told you, that the Governing Council -- the circumstances -- the situation in Iraq and the Governing Council's progress led us to believe that this transfer of sovereignty could take place in a realistic and helpful way.

Q So do you expect the violence -- do you have a number, like, of loss of life will determine how you will run your --

THE PRESIDENT: Of course not. We're not leaving until we get the job done.

Q How long is that and how --

THE PRESIDENT: That's like if you were interviewing me before the attack on Baghdad, you would have said, how long is it going to take? And I would have said, however long, you know -- I mean, you're asking me to put calendars on things -- this is the second calendar question you've asked me.

Q Some people make a parallel between Iraq and Vietnam. Do you see it?

THE PRESIDENT: I know that people are anxious to be free. They were glad to get rid of Saddam Hussein.

They were pleased when his sons met their demise. This person tortured, brutalized an entire population. And it's a different situation.

Q I didn't hear the word "Vietnam" in your answer.

THE PRESIDENT: No, because -- I gave you the answer, you asked the question. You asked me if there's parallel. I said it's a different situation. You understand the difference here, the people --

Q Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: Okay. You know what I'm talking about, the people are pleased to get rid of Saddam.

Q Mr. President, is it accurate to say that your military did a good job and they won the war in a very quite short and surprising matter, but your civilian managers did not manage the country very well?

THE PRESIDENT: I think what's safe to say is that the initial phase of the war went well, and the second phase of the war is going as expected, because Baathists -- there are some people who refuse to give up and yield to freedom because they were the ruling elite. And we're making, in many phases, very strong progress.

For example, the currency. I think if you were to go back and look at the history of currency replacements or issuing new currencies, that's not an easy task. And, yet --

Q -- President Saddam, his face on the currency --

THE PRESIDENT: No, they've got new currencies. And that's hard to do. And, yet, we're making good, steady progress in replacing the currency.

The oil revenue is an interesting question. Again, this was an issue, if you remember, before the -- when the ultimatum was reached, there was a lot of speculation that if we went to war, the Iraqi -- the main asset of the Iraqi people would be destroyed and it would take years to bring the oil production back up. But, in fact, the oil is flowing, up to about 2.1 million barrels a day, to the benefit of the Iraqi people.

In other words -- and we got that ministry stood up very quickly and it's functioning well. The school system -- I think there's 1,500 elementary schools up and running with new textbooks and supplies. The hospitals -- I mean, there's example after example on the civil society side where we've made good progress.

Obviously, what is -- what's tough are the terrorists who kill. And they kill Iraqis. They kill international aid workers. They kill because they're trying to shake our will. And they're not going to shake -- they're not going to shake our will.

Q Are you going to visit Baghdad?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't know yet. Will I at some point in time? I certainly hope so.

Q Before election or --

THE PRESIDENT: (Laughter.) I don't know. I'm just trying to finish my trip here to England.

Q What about the road map? It's your project, but nothing has --

THE PRESIDENT: No, it's our project.

Q Nothing has happened so far.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, that's not exactly correct. I mean, it's -- first of all, the road map exists -- let me tell

you, this was U.S., EU, U.N. and Russia. So it's kind of an international strategy toward saying to parties, take responsibility, be responsible citizens.

I gave a speech on June 24th, '02, in the Rose Garden, which -- get on the web page and look at it, because it will give you my sense of -- I hate to keep directing you to my speeches -- but it will give you a sense for -- and I reiterated that today. I spent quite a bit of time in the speech today on the Arab-Israeli issue. And I called on all parties to adhere to responsibility.

I said, the best way for -- see, I believe that the Palestinians deserve a state. As a matter of fact, I'm the first United States President to stand up and call for that. And I believe it, and I mean it. But that state must be democratic in order for it to survive, with institutions that will survive the test of time. And it needs leadership that will not steal money, that will not deal with terrorists, that will not continually dash the hopes of the Palestinian people.

And I found such a leader, I thought, in Abu Mazen. And I stood with him in Aqaba, Jordan, and as you might recall -- and Israel has got responsibilities, and the Arab states have got responsibilities. And I delineated Israel's responsibilities -- end the settlements, and not prejudice final negotiations on states with walls, to end the daily humiliation of the Palestinians. This was all clearly enunciated today, by the way, in the public arena.

Anyway, I was with Abu Mazen. He convinced me that he believes in the aspirations of the Palestinians, and he wanted to work on the security issue. He wanted to dismantle the security -- these terrorist organizations, which are destroying any chance for peace. And guess what happens to him -- he gets shoved aside. And I thought it was an interesting lesson.

We hope this new Prime Minister will stand up and do what is right, which is to work to dismantle the terrorist organizations, and put the institutions in place that are larger than the people -- institutions which will survive the test of time, so Palestine can emerge as a peaceful, viable, democratic state.

Anyway, so therefore -- that's it, the road map -- there is a road map. The road map calls for mutual responsibilities. I just laid the division at the end of the road, which I believe in.

Q Can I ask about now, a loaded question, which is, I know it's --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, you've already asked about five loaded questions. (Laughter.)

Q It's about three countries. I'd like to hear your -- exactly how you're going to treat the end of this crisis. One is Iran, how you're going to --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it depends on Iran's decision --

Q -- on Syria, and finally your friends in Saudi Arabia.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. Well, first of all, let's start with Saudi Arabia. Crown Prince Abdullah is an honest man. And he is a friend of mine. I like him and respect him. And he has told me that we are joined at fighting off the terrorist organizations which threatened the Kingdom and they threaten the United States, and he's delivering. He also has told me that he's going to work on reform, and I believe him.

Iran: The choice is theirs. They must adhere to the non-proliferation treaty that they agreed to. And they must be transparent and open and honest with the world about their ambitions. It looks like we're making some progress. The Secretary of State, as you know, yesterday met with ministers from European countries with this message; that we all need to speak with a unified voice that says to the Iranians, get rid of your nuclear weapons ambitions. And hopefully the -- not hopefully -- and work with the IAEA to develop a open and transparent regime with the Iranians.

Syria: Again, it's the leader of Syria's choice to make. The most important thing that he can do -- oh, by the way, on the Iranians, one other point I want to make to you is that they hold al Qaeda operatives. And we

would hope that those al Qaeda operatives were sent back to their countries of origin.

Q From Iran.

THE PRESIDENT: In Iran, yes.

Syria: We have talked to Syria before and we still feel very strongly about the same thing, that they need to shut down the Hezbollah offices in their country, Syria.

Q -- Jihad --

THE PRESIDENT: Hezbollah. And JI, absolutely. Hamas, if there are such offices there. And they need to do a better job on their border to stop any infiltration going from Syria into Iraq with weapons and terrorists and Jihadists. A peaceful Iraq is in Syria's interest. A free and peaceful Iraq is in the interest of the neighborhood. And we would hope that Syria would be cooperative in the development of a free and peaceful Iraq, and not turn away from any infiltrations that might be taking place -- that are taking place -- from Syria into Iraq.

Q Does that mean you will -- on Syria, is there negotiation now taking place?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, there's -- there's not much negotiation. How do you mean, negotiations?

Q Discussions.

THE PRESIDENT: It's hard to negotiate -- stop terror. You either stop terror or you don't stop terror. It's not -- oh, yes, they understand, they know our feelings, they do, yes.

Q They know it by -- there is someone in between?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, they know it because they -- first, they're going to read their story, and since I'm speaking directly to you and there's nobody in between, they will hear that. Secondly, that Secretary of State Powell talked to President Assad last -- early last summer, I think it was, and delivered some of this message. This is before -- I say, some of it, because this is before the -- well, I think he delivered all the message, if I'm not mistaken. I mean, he is -- in other words, if you're saying, has anybody -- has President Assad heard from my government? Yes, Secretary of State Powell had a good talk with him.

Q Did you promise Blair anything about the road map? Because there's a story yesterday about it.

THE PRESIDENT: What do you mean, promise him anything?

Q Prime Minister Blair, about the road map. There was a story yesterday that came out -- to be activated or some --

THE PRESIDENT: We haven't talked about the road map. I mean, we talk about the Middle East all the time, but he hasn't said -- I'm not sure what you're referring to. It seems like a lot of things are printed in the newspapers here. (Laughter.) Not yours.

Q Can I just have your signature here, please?

THE PRESIDENT: I'd love to. Thank you. Thanks for the interview.

Q Thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: And what you need to do is get stationed in America again. (Laughter.)

END 3:10 P.M. (Local)

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