



# The White House

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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For Immediate Release  
Office of the Press Secretary  
May 20, 2004

## Interview of the President by AL Zaman Newspaper

The Library  
May 18, 2004

4:45 P.M. EDT

Q Mr. President, I'd like to thank you very much for this opportunity that you provided to Al Zaman Newspaper and the Iraqi media. I hope that this meeting and interview with you will be meaningful and will give the Iraqi people the answers they're looking for.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I look forward to answering your questions. I want to thank you for coming. Welcome to the White House and welcome to America.

Q Mr. President, a few days ago there was an assassination attempt of -- an actual assassination of Mr. Izzedin Saleem, and you have described this as a terrorist act. Are there particular groups behind this assassination? And what are they, specifically? Who is behind this assassination attempt?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I don't know. I can't name a person yet. We're looking to find out who did this terrible, terrible deed. The facts will come out. We'll find the truth.

But one of the truths we do know is that there are some people who are trying to stop Iraq from being a free country. They hate the thought of Iraq being free, and so, therefore, they're trying to kill people, innocent lives, to shake our will and to frighten Iraqi people. America will not be frightened. And I hope that those who love freedom in Iraq will not be frightened. We must continue to work together to achieve the objective, which is an Iraq which is free, whole and at peace, so people can realize their potential.

We'll find the truth about who killed this good man, and he will be brought to justice by the Iraqi citizens.

Q Mr. President, what are your future plans regarding Iraq and the Iraqi people in developing both their political life and their civic life?

THE PRESIDENT: Sure. June 30th is an important day in modern Iraqi history, because it's the day that sovereignty will be passed to an interim government. And when America says something, we mean it. So on that day there will be a new government, which will begin -- which will replace Mr. Bremer and the Governing Council. At the same time, America will set up an embassy, headed by a very distinguished diplomat named Ambassador Negroponte. He will have the responsibility for seeing to it that the reconstruction aid approved by the American people through the Congress is spent properly. So, in other words, we'll continue with the reconstruction aid.

We will work with the new interim government on security matters. It's going to be very important for the people of Iraq to realize that sovereignty has been passed and that America wants to help the new government prepare the way for elections, help the new government prepare the way for peace, to help the new government on security matters -- by doing two things: one, training Iraq, continuing to train policemen and Iraqi forces so the Iraqi people take care of their own security needs against the few who want to stop the hopes of many; as well as help the Iraqi forces deal with foreign fighters, for example, who are still in the

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country and trying to kill people and intimidate and to create fear.

So we'll have an active role. But the truth of the matter is, Iraq will be run by Iraqi citizens. The future of Iraq is in your hands. We're there to help. We're there to help the people realize dreams. The people of this country are very generous and compassionate people, and we want you to succeed.

Q Mr. President, you mentioned now about the transfer of sovereignty through a political process. But there are those who are saying that the transfer of sovereignty on June 30th will be an incomplete sovereignty, and not a complete sovereignty. So, Mr. President, do you have different issues of this --

THE PRESIDENT: I do have a different view. It will be a complete passage of sovereignty. And then we'll work with the government to help the government achieve objectives. And we'll work with the United Nations. But what happens on June 30th is that the ministries will be run by Iraqis. Some ministries, as you know, aren't. I mean, the coalition -- the CPA is making many decisions for the Iraqi people. Now it's time for the Iraqi people.

Now, people will say, well, can you give us help; we need help in certain areas. And of course the coalition and America will want to help. But the decision-making process will be Iraqi leadership. This will be a big day. It's an important day. And then, of course, there will elections to a general assembly that will then write a new constitution. And there will be another election. And America wants to help. And I think the interim government is going to realize it's important for our troops to stay there, to make sure that there is security -- and we will do so, we will help. But this is an important day. It's a transfer of sovereignty, and people will see that it's a transfer of sovereignty.

Q Mr. President, I thank you for this explanation and your insistence on transferring sovereignty on the 30th of June. I would like to move into another issue, which is much more sensitive in Iraq. There is the scandal of the behavior of American soldiers in abusing prisoners in Abu Ghraib Prison. Some of those prison guards said that they carried out these acts as instructions coming from higher up.

Do you believe, Mr. President, that there are much more senior people in the administration who could be behind this?

THE PRESIDENT: Let me first speak directly to the Iraqi people through you on this matter. The actions in that prison did not reflect the attitude of America and the American people. These humiliating acts do not reflect our character.

Secondly, the Iraqi people and the world will see that we will conduct a thorough investigation for the whole world to see so that the truth will be known as to how these actions might have taken place. In other words, were there orders, who gave the orders. And the world will see that -- which is very different, by the way, from a process that would have been under Saddam Hussein. In other words, you would never know these abuses took place, much less being able to ask the leader questions as a member of the free press, or the ability for the world to see a very transparent process.

I want to know the truth, too. And I look forward to a thorough investigation. And there will be a thorough investigation. As a matter of fact, part of the investigation process is to bring people to justice. And there will be a trial, shortly, in Iraq, and we will find out the -- in other words, this will be the beginnings of the process where people will see justice will be meted out for the action of those guards. But you've just got to know that I'm interested in the truth, as well, just like you're interested in the truth.

And one of the things in our country is people are innocent until proven guilty. And, therefore, with that presumption of innocence, therefore, the process must be very thorough before you start accusing people. And that's what you'll see, you'll see this unfold in a series of hearings and investigations and, in some cases, military trials.

Q Mr. President, now there are very sad events in the city of Najaf. There is fighting between the al Sadr's militia and the coalition forces. How do you look and see Mr. Al Sadr, and why do you think that the CPA refused an agreement with Muqtada al Sadr as some reports mentioned that the Shia religious leaders, such as Sistani, embraced such an agreement, but it was rejected by the CPA. Don't you think this is an

escalation? And who would be benefitted from that escalation?

THE PRESIDENT: I've got to tell you, I must tell you, I am not exactly sure of the agreement to which you refer. I do know a couple of things. One, that Shia leaders are getting very impatient with al Sadr and that it's best that the Iraqi leadership take care of him. One of the things we've insisted -- or I've said publicly is that he's been accused of a crime and he ought to be tried by Iraqis. And they ought to settle this issue in a court in Iraq.

Secondly, I've made it very clear that our troops will honor the great religious shrines in the holy sites and that we'll protect the holy sites. Now, on the other hand, he's made the decision to occupy the holy sites, and that's unfortunate.

Thirdly, I will tell you that when militia threaten our troops or threaten innocent Iraqis, we will protect ourselves and protect them, because a peaceful Iraq must not have militias running -- you know, making decisions. There needs to be order and there needs to be calm.

But Mr. Sadr, who has made some pretty outlandish statements in the past, can best be dealt with by Shia leadership. And, obviously, would hope this will end his occupation, will end soon.

Now, as to negotiations, I'm not at liberty to comment on it because I'm not exactly sure about what you're referring to.

Q There were some negotiations and there was an agreement between Muqtada al Sadr, according to what the press reports said --

THE PRESIDENT: Why don't you check on that. Thank you.

Q Mr. President, I believe that you might agree with me that there is a slowdown in the reconstruction process of Iraq. And some of the donor countries are not fulfilling their financial obligations. What is the U.S. intention in motivating those countries to fulfill their obligations?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, that's a very good question. I think, first of all, the first question is, if I were you I'd ask, will America fulfill its obligation. And the answer is, yes, we will. Which is a lot of reconstruction money.

Now, the expenditure of that money has slowed down from our perspective because of the security situation. And that's why it's essential that Iraqis, themselves, stand up and join those who are anxious for life to improve to reject the violence of the few people. It's essential that we be successful at transforming the police force into -- and the forces that are there to protect infrastructure into a viable force which works, with a good command structure, an Iraqi command structure, so that projects can move forward.

Secondly, I have a chance to speak to leaders of the world in person here in the next couple weeks, and we'll continue to remind them of the joint obligation the free world has to see to it that we're successful in Iraq. And the definition of "success" is a society which is peaceful and free, that governs itself; a society in which children can go to school and which the health care is good and which the infrastructure is strong, and in which the businesses flourish -- all of which I think is going to happen, by the way. That we all have an obligation to work toward that day, because a free and peaceful Iraq is in the world's interest.

And so I'll continue to remind people of their obligations. I will tell you, though, part of the reluctance for people to come forward is because of the security situation. People see on their TV screens the fact that aid workers or reconstruction workers get killed, and it creates a sense of fear -- precisely what the enemy wants. That's why it's important for the Iraqis and the leadership here in America to stand firm in the face of these terrorist attacks and not be intimidated, and to move forward with a positive program that is going to make -- it's going to change the country in such a positive way.

Q Mr. President, last question, and it's a two-part question. How do you view the countries neighboring Iraq? And Syria was punished. Is it because their position regarding the American presence in Iraq? And what is the situation regarding Iran? And do you -- afraid of Shiite state and government in Iraq? And what is the

message you'd like to convey to the Iraqi people? Thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: That is an excellent question. First, no, my decision towards Syria was really based upon a series of requests we had of the government to reject terrorist organizations, to help fight off cross-border infiltration into your country, to join us to make the area peaceful. And our requests were rejected, and therefore, I started a process as a result of a law passed by the United States Congress.

Secondly, in terms of Iran, my concern with Iran is that they would -- that they believe they can develop a nuclear weapon. I think that would be a big mistake, and I think it's very important for the world to work with the Iranians and insist they not develop a weapon.

No, I do not believe that there's going to be a Shia theocracy in Iraq, dominated by Iran. I believe the Iraqi people are -- want to have their own country, their own identity, that understand the Shia, Sunni and Kurd can and must work together for the good of the whole. And I believe the Iraqi people don't want to be dominated by anybody. They want the United States to be a friend, but the United States to not dominate. They certainly don't want the Iranians to dominate. Iraq is plenty capable of being a strong, independent nation. And our objective is to help them become that nation.

I want the Iraqi people to hear me on this. I'm told that some in Iraq are very worried that America will lose its will and not help this important country full of good people become a free country. The Iraqi people must understand that I will not lose my will; that we will help Iraq become free and peaceful; that we will stand with those who want a new Iraq after Saddam Hussein to develop, where mothers and dads can raise their children in a peaceful world, where business and shopkeepers can grow their businesses, where the education system works well, where people can get good health. And I believe it's possible.

And I call upon the Iraqi people to reject violence, band together to insist that the country move toward a peaceful tomorrow. Iraq is changing for the better. I mean, look at the soccer team. The Iraq soccer team is going to the Olympics as a proud -- to represent a proud new country. And I'm excited. I'm excited for the Olympic team; I'm excited for the Iraqi people. And I look forward someday to greeting an Iraqi leader dedicated to peace and freedom, just like I've had the opportunity to greet you, as a fellow human being, as a person who -- I respect people. I respect their religion. I respect human rights. I respect human dignity. And that's the kind of society I know will grow up in Iraq.

This is historic times. They're hard times. But there are better times ahead, but it requires courage and strength and will. And I want to thank you for coming to the White House. It's been my pleasure to be with you, sir.

Q I thank you very much, Mr. President, for this opportunity once again. And I hope that you will have many opportunities with the Iraqi press in the future.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, sir. Thank you. Very good.

END 5:05 P.M. EDT

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