



THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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Office of the Vice President
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Interview of a Senior Administration Official by the Traveling Press

Aboard Air Force Two
En Route Muscat, Oman

3:07 P.M. (Local)

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: The reason the President wanted me to come, obviously, is because of the continuing threat that exists in this part of the world on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistan border -- a threat to Afghanistan, clearly, in our efforts there, the Taliban, cross-border operations; a threat to Musharraf and his government. There were something like seven or eight suicide bombings in the last week or two in Pakistan. And obviously also, the threat to the homeland from the standpoint of operations and activities of al Qaeda in this part of the world -- for example, you go back to the airliner plot last fall, second generation Pakistani militants living in the U.K., but with ties back in al Qaeda areas along the Pakistan-Afghan border. So we've all got an interest, obviously, in trying to address those issues.

Let me just make one editorial comment here. I've seen some press reporting says, "Cheney went in to beat up on them, threaten them." That's not the way I work. I don't know who writes that, or maybe somebody gets it from some source who doesn't know what I'm doing, or isn't involved in it. But the idea that I'd go in and threaten someone is an invalid misreading of the way I do business.

I would describe my sessions both in Pakistan and Afghanistan as very productive. We've had notable successes in both places. I've often said before and I believe it's still true that we've captured and killed more al Qaeda in Pakistan than anyplace else. And I think we're making progress in Afghanistan.

My sense of it was Karzai was more positive and optimistic than I'd seen in my recent visits. That doesn't mean that there's no threat. That doesn't mean -- no rosy scenario. There's a hell of a lot of work to be done. The point is a lot of work has been done. I was struck by the luncheon we had with Karzai, he started reciting all the things that had been accomplished since we moved into Afghanistan in the aftermath of 9/11 -- in terms of economically, socially and so forth. He told a story to the group there about -- this was the immediate aftermath of 9/11 -- about meeting with a group of tribal elders in one of the remote parts of Afghanistan. He was trying to get them organized to participate in going after the Taliban and governing Afghanistan. And he said the only question they wanted to ask me was, is the United States with you.

Before we launched into Afghanistan, that was a big item with respect to the attitude of the Afghan people.

Q Sir, did you say, is the United States with you?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Yes.

I'm struck also by the extent to which both of these governments signed on as allies in the war on terror. It has real meaning to them in their respective countries. If you look at Karzai, folks in Afghanistan and the fact of the presence of the United States, our military role, the economic aid and assistance we're providing, all of this is absolutely vital to their ability to continue to improve the circumstances on the ground, to train their own Afghan forces, and to take on more and more responsibility, viable functioning governments.

I've often spoken and would reiterate again today, when you think about the debate at home, some of my friends on the other side of the aisle arguing that we need to get out of Iraq, then you go spend some time with our allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan, you can't help but be convinced that that would have a devastating impact, devastating consequences for what they're trying to do, what they've agreed to do in terms of their ongoing efforts with us as allies in these struggles in this part of the world.

Q Could you elaborate on that just a little bit? What sorts -- do you think they see a lack of will on the part of the United States to stick with them as well?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Sure. One of the reasons I think Karzai was upbeat was because of the United States' economic and financial commitment. We've asked for significant sums for him this year in the budget, the commitment of an additional brigade of troops to beef up what's already there, that's all taken as a sign of our commitment, specifically to Afghanistan. They worry about that. They look over their shoulders, obviously, and if they see weakness on the part of the United States, or an unwillingness to carry through on our commitments, they automatically raise questions about how good our commitment to them is.

In Pakistan, a slightly different situation, obviously. We don't have U.S. forces on the ground in Pakistan. But Musharraf, of course, has been the target of assassination attempts. He's been closely allied with us going after al Qaeda. And, again, you've got people who, in effect, are betting the farm, so to speak, that they can count on the United States to be there, and to support them, and in many cases provide the leadership necessary to prevail in this global conflict with these extreme elements of Islam. And it would be difficult to sustain that conviction on their part if the United States were to suddenly decide that the problems in Iraq are too tough; we're going to pack it in and go home. So there are consequences in this part of the world for a course of action that some people are advocating in the U.S.

Q In your discussions with them, do you still get a sense that they're still not taking responsibility on each side of the border for themselves, and that there's still kind of finger-pointing going on about who is in charge and who is enforcing the border?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, there's a certain amount of tension there. No question about it, but we are working hard at getting them to work together. We've had some success in that area. There's clearly more to be done.

Q Do you feel like you made headway on that particular issue in these meetings?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think so, but you don't know -- the test will be in

terms of whether or not, we're able to see results on the ground. These are age-old problems. You sit down and talk with Karzai, he'll talk about the history of Pashtun rule in the region for 500 years. He can tell you what the Durand Treaty was all about between Afghanistan and India in 1889 or whenever it was, and why that's important to today's conflict and so forth. So this is not a problem that just sort of developed on the spur of the moment. A lot of Afghans living in Pakistan during the Soviet era because they were refugees. A lot of them have gone home now, but there's still some who haven't. There's still some in those refugee camps. So movement back and forth across that border is nothing unusual, nor is it very recent. It's been going on for ages.

Q How much did the current debate in Congress, all the talk about restricting the surge, or revising the resolution, all of that, how much did that contribute to the necessity of your coming here and now? In other words, absent that debate, would there have been a different scenario? Have they forced you to sort of step forward and say, look, don't worry about what you're hearing?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't think so.

Q You've spoken also, though, about some of the things that Speaker Pelosi and Representative Murtha have said how that does play to the hands of --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I was asked by one of your colleagues.

Q But your answer was very articulate.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I responded very carefully.

Q And you suggested that they make -- they lend comfort to terrorists, essentially.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: No, what I said was that that the al Qaeda strategy is based on the notion that they can break the will of the American people. They know they can't beat us in a stand-up fight. But they do believe -- and I think there's evidence to support this -- that they can, in fact, force us to change our policy if they just kill enough Americans, create enough havoc out there. And they cite Beirut in 1983; Mogadishu, 1993, kill Americans, America changes its policy and withdraws. And Osama bin Laden and Zawahiri believe this. They talk about it. It's not a mystery.

And my point was that if we follow what I believe Speaker Pelosi really wants to do in terms of withdraw, that that would validate the al Qaeda strategy. I was very careful in those words I selected. I didn't say "give aid and comfort to terrorists." I didn't say "unpatriotic." I said it would validate the al Qaeda strategy.

Q Back to meeting with President Musharraf, does he understand the failure of the peace deal with tribal leaders? Were you able to present him with evidence of just how much al Qaeda activity is now present in that region?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I would describe it -- I don't want to base this on conversation with him. I don't want to talk about my conversation with him. But he is on record as saying it has produced fewer results than he had expected.

Q But your sense of him -- but your sense talking to him and showing him the considerable evidence that al Qaeda has gotten -- we're seeing training camps once again in this region, does he

understand the depth of the problem?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't want to go beyond where I am, and I don't want to talk about intelligence.

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Q Do you expect the spring offensive -- the Taliban has made threats, this is going to be their bloodiest year --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: Well, there's always a spring offensive. This is a weather-dominated battlefield. And what usually happens is things quiet down in the wintertime, and then pick up again once the spring thaw comes. And spring and summer are times of considerably more activity. But I think last year we were very successful at meeting that. I think we will be this year, too.

I spent over a hour with our senior military commanders yesterday there in Bagram getting briefed. I think they're ready for whatever the Taliban has to offer.

One more question.

Q If I could change the subject to something that came up earlier in the trip. You've talked about Iran and the other threat the U.S. faces there, to what extent do you think your -- it's been described as hawkish, or you're keeping the military option on the table puts a level of risk into the equation that oil markets, for example, factor in and actually help the Iranian government because they're so reliant on oil? Is there a --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I think that's a bit of a stretch. All I said is what we've said consistently for months, even years now, which is that all options are on the table. We haven't taken any option off the table.

Q If you took the military option off the table, markets around the world --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: What do you think would happen?

Q I don't know what would happen. But people say oil prices go down 10 percent or 15 percent and that would start to hurt Ahmadinejad.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL: I don't buy it.

All right, thank you all very much.

END 3:25 P.M. (Local)
