



THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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Vice President's Remarks at a Roundtable Interview by Traveling Press

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THE VICE PRESIDENT: Why don't I start out with Israel, because it's freshest and most recent. I think I had good sessions all the way around. A lot of the folks I've known a long time. I've known Ehud Olmert since he was mayor of Jerusalem. We used to attend together the Jerry Ford conference in Beaver Creek, Colorado, under AEI auspices every June.

Shimon Peres, I first met when he was defense secretary, back in the '70s, and Ehud Barak came to Washington in the summer of 1990, when he was head of the Israeli Defense Forces, and briefed me on the Iraqi nuclear program, which is all before Desert Storm starts. I've known him a long time, and it's always enjoyable to renew those relationships.

We obviously talked about a wide agenda of issues, including the peace process. We reaffirmed the President's commitment to help push the process forward. And Condi is due back, I believe, next week. The Prime Minister reaffirmed his commitment to the President's vision and his willingness to do everything he can to try to achieve a result in 2008, although he's well aware of the difficulties.

And one of the things we talked about with all of the -- both the Israelis and Palestinians was Gaza, and the situation in Gaza. It is clearly a difficult situation, in part because -- I think it's true that there are -- there's evidence that Hamas is supported by Iran and Syria, and they're doing everything they can to torpedo the peace process.

One of the ongoing concerns is the extent of which arms are being smuggled across the border from the Sinai into Gaza. It's a continuing problem. All of that, obviously has resulted in the ongoing activity of launching rockets into Israel, threatening the lives of Israelis, and obviously making it difficult for there to be the kind of progress that I think we'd all like to see.

There are -- we also talked about the region in general, and that includes the situation in Iran, and Iranian activities throughout the region; it includes the situation in Syria, in Lebanon, and with both Hezbollah and Hamas. There's been no shortage of areas of concern.

In the meeting with the Palestinians, I made clear the President's commitment to the process. They obviously were impressed with the fact that he came to Ramallah himself here in January, and Condi coming next week. The President will be back in May, into the region.

We talked, among other things, about the ongoing activity in Yemen, as the Yemenis have tried to encourage reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. My conclusion from talking with the Palestinian leadership is that they have established preconditions which would have to be filled before they would ever agree to reconciliation, including a complete reversal of the Hamas takeover of Gaza.

I tried to make clear in my statement in Ramallah, which you heard, that the U.S. is committed to doing everything we can to facilitate the peace process, although we clearly cannot dictate the outcome. Ultimately, of course, success in that endeavor depends upon having a Palestinian partner for the Israelis that accepts Israel's right to exist and rejects violence and terror.

Before we got to Israel, obviously, we spent time in Saudi Arabia. Most of that, virtually all of that was with the King; a little bit of time with Saud al-Faysal, the Foreign Minister. Again, I've known King Abdullah, first started to work with him really in the summer of 1990, at the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. And he, in those days, was the Crown Prince and commander of the Saudi national guard. But I've known him and worked with him since -- I guess that's about 18 years.

When I meet with him, we discuss a whole broad range of regional issues. He's got great awareness of what's going on in this part of the world, and we enjoy the opportunity to sit down and exchange views with the King, which we did -- I guess altogether probably spent about six hours, two meals and conversations.

You were with me in the swings through Iraq and Afghanistan. I found President Karzai to be in good spirits, positive and optimistic in his outlook; wrestling with a lot of the difficult issues that he faces as the President of Afghanistan. Also had a great session there with Dan McNeill, our commander who is the four-star, who is running operations in Iraq [sic] and his team. I come away impressed with the efforts that they've got underway there. The addition of 3,200 Marines this summer should help deal with some of their current issues.

And then of course before that, two days in Iraq; chance to spend time with the troops, with our military and diplomatic team; to meet with most of the Iraqi leadership; a chance to go to Kurdistan -- it was the first time I'd been to Kurdistan -- and spend time with President Barzani. That was a unique and interesting opportunity, to go look at what's happened in a part of Iraq that was obviously freed of Saddam Hussein's influence when the U.S. went in there and established the Operation Provide Comfort at the end of the Gulf War, and then set up the "no fly zones," and so forth. The Kurds have done very well, in terms of their development of their economy. It was the first time I'd had a chance to go personally see that, and that was a special part of the trip, as well.

Why don't I stop with that, and take some questions.

Q I just have a quick, light question for you, then a more serious question. You've had a real active role as the Vice President. I was wondering, can you tell me if your tenure kind of is going to usher in a different kind of Vice Presidency now? I think it's started to get -- to be a little bit more active with Mondale, and it's moved forward. I think most people think clearly you've been in there more than anybody. I was wondering if you think it's -- the next several Vice Presidents will be equally as active? Maybe not so -- maybe we'll go back to where we were.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't know, in the sense that it's always -- I think, to the extent that I've looked back at it, watched several Vice Presidents operate -- it's a very sort of personal kind of thing, with the President, the time in which he governs. George Bush really is the one who has

made this possible, who wanted me not because he was worried about carrying Wyoming. He was going to get Wyoming whether or not I was on the ticket.

But as he said at the time, he wanted me to sign on as a member of the team, somebody who would be an active participant in the governing process, and he's kept his word. He's been great at it, and the relationship has prospered now for more than seven years because of the understandings we came to. There's no contract, job description, being Vice President.

You go back and look at how it's developed over the years, it wasn't until really I guess Richard Nixon was Vice President that he even had an office downtown. Harry Truman's office was on Capitol Hill.

Q So do you think we're going to see a similar --

THE VICE PRESIDENT: What I would say is, there has been, I think since the Mondale era, when he was Carter's Vice President, there's been an expansion of the role of the Vice President. Mondale was the first one to have an office in the West Wing. That helped, that sort of helps integrate you with the operation. You talk to Jerry Ford, as I did many times, he always expressed to me the view that the worst nine months of his life were the ones he spent as Vice President; he just hated the job. You can conceive of a situation in the future where, for various reasons, we'll end up with a more conventional kind of arrangement. It will depend upon why the Vice President is selected, what qualities it is the President is looking for, the time in which they govern.

Q So it's not necessarily a trend?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I guess what I'm struck by -- I'm reluctant to say it's a trend. What I'm struck by, going back all the years now -- it's almost 40 years since I came to Washington -- is the extent in which each administration is different, and each administration -- the nature of it and the way these things work out is driven by two major factors: one, who is the President, and what their wishes and desires are, the personalities; and secondly, the times in which you govern. And those two things drive it more than anything else, more than the institutional arrangements. And if you look at obviously the history of the office, it can go either way.

Q I have to ask my serious question. We're at the 4,000 death mark, we just passed it.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I saw that.

Q Did you ever think it would get that high?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, you regret every casualty, every loss. The President is the one who has to make that decision to send young men and women into harm's way, and it never gets any easier. We receive reports every single time we lose a soldier. And the President meets with, and I've met with -- he does it more than I do -- but with a lot of the families of the fallen.

Q It does have a psychological effect on the public.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, it may have a psychological affect on the public. But it's a tragedy that we live in the kind of world where that happens. But we do live in that kind of world. One of the tremendous assets we have as a nation is the all-volunteer force, where people sign up and serve in the United States military to go in harm's way and to take those risks on behalf of the rest

of us. When you're sitting in one of these jobs, especially in a time -- in wartime, you never lose sight of that.

Q I wanted to go back to your visit with King Abdullah. Was there anything at all that came out of that visit that you could foresee affecting oil prices in the short term?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I did spend time with Ali al-Naimi, who is the Saudi oil minister. I've known him a long time. I guess I've been around so long I know all of them a long time.

What we did was review the situation in the international oil markets as it exists today. About three years ago, in a meeting in Dallas, we talked with the King and with Minister Naimi about expanding production capacity. The Saudis at that time indicated to us that they would do that. They were then producing about 10.5 million barrels a day. They said they would add 2 million barrels a day of production over the next four or five years, up through the end of '09, and they've kept their word.

As I say, they started at 10.5 million barrels, they're up to about 11.8 million barrels now, in terms of capacity. This doesn't mean they're necessarily producing 11.8 million barrels a day, this is their capacity to produce. It's that excess capacity that's important. They will be at 12.5 million barrels a day by the end of '09. They've invested, I think they said \$90 billion to expand that capability. So we asked them some time ago to expand their capacity, and they in fact have done it.

In terms of what's happening in the oil markets out there, there's several other considerations. One, obviously demand is increasing. Secondly, demand is increasing not just globally in China and India and the U.S., it's also increasing in the producing countries. Those states that are producing petroleum are consuming more of what they produce, because their economies are growing, diversifying. If you go look at United Arab Emirates, for example, in the Gulf, or Saudi Arabia, or the States, these are economies that are becoming more complex, consuming more energy. So to the extent that that demand grows in the producing countries, that's less that's available for export.

And finally, and it's a point I made many times before, as a nation, in the United States, we've decided not to produce in certain areas. So when we put ANWR off limits, for example -- Congress twice approved that, Bill Clinton vetoed it -- if ANWR were on line today, we'd have probably an extra million barrels a day of production. That would help with the prices of gasoline and everything else. We don't have it, because a decision was made not to do it. I think it's the wrong decision. I don't want you to think I agree with that decision. But the fact of the matter is, the United States, over the years, has put large areas of our territory off limits to production for various reasons. We don't drill off the east or the west coast, we don't drill off Florida, we don't drill in parts of Alaska. And that, too, means we're more dependent on those foreign sources and the exports, and more vulnerable to the fluctuations in the international oil markets. And all of that, ultimately, gets reflected in the price of gasoline and everything else we've got.

Q I wanted to follow up. You did make it clear just now, and earlier in the week, that you don't there's very much excess capacity before -- not much that can be done immediately.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: There's less excess capacity than there used to be.

Q Right. If that's the case, and it's a complicated situation, as you said, why would the President when he came here issue a very public request in Saudi for OPEC to pump more oil? What was it, to send a message to the public? What was the point of that?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Well, I wasn't here, and I don't -- I don't find it surprising, though, that he would make that suggestion.

Q When you met with King Abdullah, did you make a similar sort of suggestion?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I had -- as I say, I had my conversation with the energy minister, with Ali Naimi.

Q Did you make that -- so you made that request of him?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Basically, what we did was discuss the fact, as they currently understand the oil market, and that we did ask them to produce more, increase their capacity three years ago, and they've kept that commitment.

Anybody else?

Q One more. To follow up on your last question, you said, when you were standing with Prime Minister Olmert, that you would never ask the Israelis to do anything that would threaten their own security. And I'm wondering, if they came to you and the President and said, we need to strike Iran to maintain our own security, would you try to stop them?

THE VICE PRESIDENT: That's a hypothetical question, Steve.

Q Did they come to you and -- (laughter.)

THE VICE PRESIDENT: I don't do hypotheticals.

THE VICE PRESIDENT: Thank you for the time. Good having you on the trip.

END 9:55 A.M. (Local)