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President Bush Meets with Prime Minister Topolánek of the Czech Republic

Oval Office

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10:54 A.M. EST

PRESIDENT BUSH: We'll have opening statements, and then we'll accept two questions a side. Mr. Prime Minister, welcome. We value our friendship and our partnership with the people of the Czech Republic. I remember well my visit to your beautiful country.

We've had a significant discussion today. It turns out the year eight is an important number in Czech history. And we're determined to make the year 2008 a strong chapter in our relationship. We view the Czech Republic as a strategic partner. We've discussed a variety of issues. I want to talk about two issues.

First, visa waiver. I've always felt our visa laws needed to change. I didn't like the idea that we treated our friends in the Czech Republic differently than other friends in Europe. There's new law in place, which requires leadership from the countries such as the Czech Republic. Mr. Prime Minister, you and your government are providing that leadership.

We signed an important memorandum of understanding. We were able to do so because your negotiators were very smart. They represented your people very well. We still have more work to do, but I'm confident we can get it done. And I hope the people of the Czech Republic understand that your government and your country is ahead of the line of anybody else when it comes to a visa waiver program. And I congratulate you on your leadership.



Missile defense. It's in our interest to put defenses in place to deal with the true threats of the 21st century. Russia is not a threat to peace. Regimes that adhere to extremist ideologies, which may have the capability of launching weapons to those of us who love freedom, they're the threats to peace. And a missile defense system is aimed to deal with those threats.

And of course we want it in the context not only of a bilateral relationship, but in the context of NATO. We're both strong partners of NATO. NATO has got to be in a position to deal with the true threats of the 21st century. And so we had a good discussion on this important issue.

In our discussions, I strongly respect the sovereignty of the government of the Czech Republic. Where they have concerns, of course we'll listen. And so I want to thank you for that. And at the same time, of course, we discussed very important research and development opportunities, defense cooperation activities.

And finally, I thanked the Prime Minister for the courage and sacrifice of the troops that are in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Prime Minister said that there will be a reduction in troops in Iraq, and I fully understand that. After all, we're reducing our troops based upon success. And I thank your willingness to send troops into Afghanistan. It makes sense to help young democracies thrive. They will look back at these decisions, Mr. Prime Minister, and say, thank goodness for the peace that prevailed as a result of the hard decisions we made today.

And I welcome -- you're welcome, thank you for coming.



PRIME MINISTER TOPOLÁNEK: (As translated.) Well, I think that President Bush already mentioned everything I wanted to mention originally. However, let me revisit or come back to the issue of number eight and its importance in our history. Number eight played a very important, nay, a key role in the history of the Czech nation. In 1918, when the first Czechoslovak republic was founded, it was founded with help and assistance from the American President Woodrow Wilson.

Unfortunately 1938, which was the time of the Munich Agreement, the Americans were not with us. And therefore it was an unfortunate year, similarly as 1948, we commemorated 60 years since the coup d'etat of the communists in 1948 just on the 25th of February.

In 1968 the Prague Spring has occurred, and unfortunately after a few months of relative liberty and freedom, we were occupied by the Soviet armies.

So what I want to say is, in terms of these number eight years, it was always very important for the Czech Republic, nay, even decisive, whether we were with the Americans or whether we were on our own. And I really wish that the year 2008 will become a similarly important year, both for the Czech Republic and also with the United States of America and our mutual relationship.

And I believe that stationing the missile defense system in our country is, in terms of its importance, similarly important to those events I've been just mentioning in relation to the number eight in our history.

And everybody is, of course, interested to find out whether an agreement has been already done. There are only three words remaining to be resolved and discussed. (Laughter.) But sometimes one word matters a lot and sometimes an agreement might fail just because of one word. But this is not the case. These are just minor details and I'm sure that we're going to finalize it very soon.

And in terms of the visa waiver program, I would like to use this opportunity and thank President Bush for his efforts. And I very much appreciate when a politician or a person says something or promises something and he also delivers on this promise, and this is the case.

So I would like to thank President Bush for his leadership, but I also would like this leadership to become his ownership. (Laughter.) And of course there are many politicians in the world, but there are very few politicians who are real statesmen. To have one's principles, to stick to those principles irrespective of -- to go against all odds and adhere to those principles, this is what only very few people can do. We've not spoken about this extensively, but this is what I appreciate the most.

What I believe is of also equally significant importance is the starting of the strategic dialogue between the two countries, between the U.S. and the Czech Republic. And I think the outcome of these negotiations is also very good. Both countries we agreed on research and development in the area of missile defense and generally in the defense systems.

Just one marginal note on the visa waiver program process. I think that the negotiations have been really tough and the result achieved is a true breakthrough -- a breakthrough moment. I think that this is a great achievement, because first we joined the Schengen zone, which enabled the Czech citizens to travel from Lisbon, as far as Vilnius without the use of any passport or ID, and we did the same for our citizens in terms of traveling to Canada and the United States of America. So we guaranteed one of the basic human rights, which is freedom of movement.

We at the same time are fully aware of the risks and dangers of a security nature which exists all over the world, and therefore we want to guarantee higher security to our nation. And also the agreement takes into consideration the reciprocal principle -- the principle of reciprocity.

I also would like to mention that a great deal of our discussion revolved around issues of human rights in the world. We spoke about Cuba, we spoke about the recent events and our hope for the future. And we also talked about other countries which so far have not been so fortunate to live in freedom like the Czech Republic.

I, personally, am very happy from this meeting. I want to thank President Bush for his openness and for this

wonderful meeting.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you very much. A couple of questions, Jennifer.

Q Thank you. Can you elaborate a little on what's holding up an agreement on missile defense? And how close are you to getting an agreement with Poland, as well?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Well, I appreciate that. Obviously, this is a complicated issue that requires the United States, one, to make the case of why a missile defense is needed in the first place; that it is aimed to bring stability to Europe; that it's important for mutual security; that it fits into the concept of NATO; and will honor the sovereignty of the Czech Republic or Poland.

And so the discussions revolve around a status of forces type agreement, which requires understanding by the Czech government of exactly what is meant when it talks about stationing a radar site. We will be coming to their country -- under what conditions, how will people conduct themselves -- and these are all very legitimate questions that the Prime Minister is asking. The same questions are being asked in Poland.

And I explained to the Prime Minister the following thing: people are wondering, is this aimed at Russia? Is this an anti-Russian system? And the answer is, of course not. The system we're developing will be able to deal with one, two or three types of incoming missiles. And Russia could overwhelm a system like this. This is a system to deal with threats that will be evolving in the 21st century.

And so the Prime Minister made it very clear when it comes to the Russian issue that his government will be making the decisions about any so-called presence. Do we want the Russians to be able to -- you know, allay their fears by understanding what's going on? Of course we do. But he made it clear to me that the Czech Republic will be making the decisions about who gets to come into their country. And I fully understand that.

And so, you know, there's a lot of discussions going on. These aren't easy agreements to put in place. But we feel optimistic that we will get this done. As the Prime Minister said, we're down to a couple of words. What you probably want to know is the three words. I'm not going to tell you. (Laughter.) I am not going to tell you -- that's five words, I tell you, I'm not going to do the three. (Laughter.)

Q How close are you to --

PRESIDENT BUSH: Close. Three words is close. We started off with a blank page, and now we're down to three words. But, anyway -- look, there is a will to get this done, for the sake of mutual security and for the sake of peace.

PRIME MINISTER TOPOLÁNEK: Just to be more specific regarding these three words --

PRESIDENT BUSH: Wait a minute, he's making me look bad here. (Laughter.)

PRIME MINISTER TOPOLÁNEK: It actually relates to environmental protection and the standards that should be adopted. So we're actually looking for the standards which would be the strictest possible standards to be applied in terms of ensuring and guaranteeing environmental protection. But that's just a technical matter which is going to be resolved very soon. It's not any problem.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Why don't you call on somebody from your press corps, if you care to.

Q Mr. President, would it be acceptable for the United States to have radar in the Czech Republic without interceptors in Poland, should that --

PRESIDENT BUSH: I don't see how -- you've got to have interceptors in order to make the system work. The idea is to use a radar system to detect a launch headed toward NATO countries and then shoot the thing down. And in order to make the system work, there has to be an integrated system.

And of course what we will work to do is, one, make the system effective, integrated, comprehensive. And the interesting opportunity is for Russia to realize the benefits of such a system by extending the radar coverage into their country, because they will be under the same threat of radicalism that we will be; "we" collectively.

If some of these countries develop a weapon that's capable of developing a nuclear warhead, free nations, nations such as Russia, do not want to be in a position of political blackmail. And our job as leaders is to deal with the issues of the day, but also deal with the issues of tomorrow in a way that yields a peaceful world. And that's what we're doing.

Stretch.

Q Mr. President, thank you. I have a national security question, two parts. You just talked about the importance of stability in Europe. How does it serve our national security to support the redrawing of borders in Europe vis-à-vis Kosovo? And secondly, can you say how -- has our national security actually been degraded by the lapse of FISA?

PRESIDENT BUSH: First, let me talk about Kosovo. We discussed Kosovo. As a consequence of the war that took place during the leaders -- during the tenure of Mr. Milosevic, one of the effects has been the desire for the -- those of us in the United Nations to promote what's called the Ahtisaari plan, which is a supervised, independent Kosovo.

This is a difficult issue, and I understand it's a difficult issue. But the U.S. government supports the supervised independence. We believe in free societies and we believe it will eventually lead to peace, but there's no -- no border has been withdrawn [sic] in that sense, Stretch. It's a -- Kosovo is a -- Kosovo's borders have been clearly defined. The type of government has changed. Now as part of the Ahtisaari plan, we fully expect this independent Kosovo to honor minority rights within their borders. And so our position has been clear.

Secondly, you asked about whether or not the United States of America should be able to listen to terrorists' phone calls coming into the United States. And the answer is, absolutely we should be doing this. There is still an extremist threat. People still want to attack our country, and we better understand what they're thinking, what they're planning and who they're talking to.

And yet unfortunately a law passed to give our professionals the tools has expired. And it's expired because people want to take class action lawsuits against private phone carriers and other companies that have -- were believed to have helped us protect America. It's not fair to say to a company that was believed to have helped us, it's important for you to help us, and then you get sued for billions of dollars. And such a policy would make it very difficult to get companies to fully cooperate with us in the future.

The law is expired, but my fellow citizens must understand the threat to America has not expired. And our citizens who are paying attention to this debate must understand, without law America will be more vulnerable to attack. Democrats and Republicans supported this law, and the House leaders must bring it to the floor, where it will pass with both Republican and Democrat vote. And if this law is allowed to expire, America will be more vulnerable. And that's inexcusable and it's indefensible.

Q (Asked in Czech.)

PRIME MINISTER TOPOLÁNEK: Well, actually, I think the same as you think. Well, if he traveled together with Mr. Zaoralek, then I think it is unforgivable.

First of all, I would like to say that these activities of the opposition leaders and their foreign policy does not really serve the interest of our country. And I would like to remind you that when I was in the opposition, and we were in the opposition we never created any kind of foreign policy on our own. And therefore, I understand the reasons for this visit to Syria. I would be much happier if they traveled as tourists, and nothing else.

I would like to actually mention that I got this present from the Secretary of Commerce, Mr. Gutierrez. It is a bracelet and there is a simple word on it, which is "cambio" meaning "change." And in Cuba you can actually get arrested for wearing this bracelet. But when I come back home I will wear this just for the sake of Mr. Paroubek

and Mr. Zaoralek. (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you all.

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