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President Bush Participates in Foreign Print Media Roundtable

Roosevelt Room

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THE PRESIDENT: All right, sit down. How is everybody doing back there? That's what we call the peanut gallery.

I'm looking forward to going to Ukraine, and Romania again, Croatia. This will be a -- it's a very important trip; important trip to discuss our bilateral relations, and it's an important trip because of NATO. I believe we'll have a successful summit. The definition of success is to make sure NATO stays relevant, and that we work in a collaborative fashion to deal with the threats of the 21st century and the opportunities of the 21st century.

And there's no better opportunity to deal with the threats of terror than in Afghanistan. So part of the mission -- part of our collective mission in Romania for the NATO meeting is to encourage people to take our obligations seriously. And the United States, to that end, will make it clear that we do take our obligations seriously. We've committed 3,500 Marines -- 3,200 Marines -- 3,700 Marines?

MR. HADLEY: 3,200.

THE PRESIDENT: -- 3,200 Marines, plus their enablers. (Laughter.) Inside joke. Anyway, to -- as a part of a stronger commitment, to set an example and encourage others to participate.

Secondly, enlargement of NATO will be on the agenda. And I'm a strong supporter of encouraging the right decision to be made at Bucharest on Croatia and Albania and Macedonia.

Thirdly, we'll be discussing the aspirations of Ukraine and Georgia. I have been public in my statements that I believe that NATO benefits, and Ukraine and Georgia benefit, if and when there is membership. I do know that one of the signals we're going to have to send, and must send, is there is a clear path forward for Ukraine and Georgia. The decision will be made, of course, at Bucharest. But I've analyzed the situation and I believe it's in the interests that there is that clear path forward. It's in the interest of NATO, collectively, and it's in the interest of each individual country.

And finally, we'll be talking about missile defense and cyber-terrorism and counter-terrorism activities, how we can work together to stay -- to stay effective in this world in which we live.

And so, anyway, I'm looking forward to the trip. And so we'll do a couple rounds of questions.

Alona. Is that an accurate way of saying your name?

Q Yes, Alona.

THE PRESIDENT: Alona.

Q Mr. President, will Ukraine be invited to participate in the Membership Action Plan at NATO summit? And how much, if it gets it, this invitation, how much time will be needed for Ukraine to enter NATO?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes --

Q Nine years as it is for Macedonia, or five years as it was for the Baltic States?

THE PRESIDENT: Iona, first of all, it's -- the decision will be made by NATO members at Bucharest. So when I come to your country I'll be saying that I believe that Ukraine benefits from not only the process to join NATO, but eventually, hopefully, joining NATO. But that decision won't be made until we're all there in Romania.

Secondly, it just depends on the country as to how long events will -- the reforms take in order to get offered membership into NATO. So the first step, however, is for there to be a clear path forward, so that people understand -- and I believe it's in our collective interest that we offer a clear path forward. But it's very important for the people in your country to understand that the decision won't be made until after I leave Ukraine and make it to Romania.

Are they still talking about the "rainbow speech"? Were you there for that?

Q Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: It was an amazing moment, wasn't it?

Q Yes, it was amazing moment, yes.

THE PRESIDENT: I was giving a speech in the town square where Ceaușescu had given his final speech. And it was raining, and just as I got up to speak a full rainbow appeared.

Q Yes. And about bridge to a new Russia.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q You remember that?

THE PRESIDENT: I remember the rainbow most of all. It was a startling moment.

Anyway, fire away, Iona.

Q Johanna (phonetic).

THE PRESIDENT: Johanna (phonetic).

Q Mr. President, Moldova is a country between NATO member Romania and possible future NATO member, Ukraine. But Moldova still has a lot of problems -- poverty, corruption and Russian troops on its territory without its consent. Washington is currently involved in resolving a breakaway region, Transdnistria. But my question is, what do you think the United States can do to help Moldova to become a democratic, independent state, and not a failed state under Russian influence, a point of instability at the NATO border?

THE PRESIDENT: Right. First is to continue to make our intentions clear, and that is that we want to work to make sure Moldova, which is now an independent nation, has got sovereign borders and is treated like an independent nation. Secondly, we constantly advocate for good, clean, open government. Thirdly, we're a member of a 5-plus-2, which is the process by which, hopefully, the Transdnistria issue would be solved.

So our strategy is to work with the relevant parties and to promote, as you said, a independent, open, transparent, good-government Moldova.

Yes, sir.

Q Mr. President --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q -- how do you see Croatia future in the NATO architecture in southeastern Europe, regarding its capability to host joint military bases, and primarily NATO forces, and the further development of its armed forces and its readiness to take part in NATO missions and contribute to the common security of the alliance?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, thank you.

Q -- and how do you see the role of Croatia in promoting peace and stability in southeastern Europe, especially regarding the present situation relating to the establishment of independent Kosovo?

THE PRESIDENT: Kosovo -- sure. Whew, it's a long question. First of all, just get this off the table -- there's no intention to have NATO bases, permanent bases. Secondly, Croatia has served as a very good example, following a very dramatic moment, and that is the breakup of Yugoslavia. And your government has made difficult decisions, and made those decisions, first and foremost, on behalf of the people. But it turns out many of the reform decisions, therefore, make it likely that Croatia will be invited into NATO.

Examples are very important. The question is, would people have predicted 15 years ago that we'd be having this kind of discussion about Croatia. And who knows -- I don't think many people would have certainly 25 years ago. And yet Croatia is a independent, sovereign nation, hopefully soon to be invited to join NATO, which is a clear example of what is possible if people make the right decisions on behalf of their people.

Part of being a part of NATO means commitment to a modern military. And Croatian troops, which have performed bravely in recent active theaters during this war against extremism, will benefit from being in NATO, and benefit from serving side by side with other members of NATO. NATO membership would be a very positive thing for the people of Croatia.

And I'm really looking forward to going to your country. I hope I'm coming with good news, but the decision will be made in this case before I go to Croatia. And they say it's one of the most beautiful coastlines in the entire world.

Q Yes. Hope you're going to see that.

THE PRESIDENT: Am I going to get to see the coastline? I hope I do.

Q I hope, I hope.

THE PRESIDENT: You're not my scheduler, okay.

Thomas.

Q Thank you, Mr. President.

THE PRESIDENT: I do think Great Britain ought to be in NATO, yes. (Laughter.)

Q I think we were last time I checked. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, you are -- and a very good member.

Q Thank you very much. In a different field of operations, in Iraq, there's been a recent upsurge again in violence, which appears to have emanated in the area of Basra, which Britain used to control. Do you believe recent events there serve as a warning to those in your country and beyond who have counseled you to withdraw rapidly?

THE PRESIDENT: My first reaction to watching the Iraqi government respond forcefully and to make it abundantly

clear that -- I think the exact -- I can't remember the exact words of the Prime Minister, but "criminal elements" I know were a part of his declaration -- would be dealt with. I thought that was a very positive moment in the development of a sovereign nation, that is willing to take on elements that are -- you know, that believe they're beyond the law.

And secondly, we are helping, but it's important to know that the Iraqis are in the lead. This is a positive moment in the development of a nation that can govern itself and defend itself and sustain itself. We will provide oversight and, on occasion, support when asked. This is an Iraqi operation.

And one of the things I'll be saying in the run-up to the Petraeus-Crocker testimony is that we have made substantial gains, but it's still a fragile situation. Therefore, the decision about our troop levels will be based upon not politics, or not who can scream the loudest, but based upon whether or not we can maintain the successes we've had. And I understand there's people here who want us to leave regardless of the situation, but that's not going to happen, so long as I'm the Commander-in-Chief.

Q Did we get out too early?

THE PRESIDENT: No, you didn't. The British commitment was -- first of all, you were there from day one, and you were there during the very heavy fighting. And the British commitment was to move to the airbase based upon success. And I'm very grateful for the British friendship and alliance, and the contributions.

Alona. What do you think, Alona? So where do you live? Kyiv?

Q Kyiv, yes.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes? So you flew all the way over here just for this interview?

Q Yes.

THE PRESIDENT: I'm very grateful. Oh, so guess what happened to me. I went down to Crawford -- that's in Texas -- and I went to an event for -- to honor some of our soldiers' families. And a local doctor -- I think it was a doctor -- came and said, would you mind meeting a group of people from Ukraine? I said, sure. And there we were in Waco, Texas, with, I think, maybe 20 or 30 health care specialists from Ukraine that were in my home state. And it was sure good to meet them.

Q And how important is Ukraine's recognition of Kosovo, in the U.S. point of view? Do you expect this step from the Ukrainian authorities in the nearest future?

THE PRESIDENT: That's going to be up to the Ukrainian authorities to make the decisions that they deem are necessary. We hope they will recognize Kosovo's independence, just like we have. It's supervised independence, of course, but we strongly supported that idea from the beginning, and supported the U.N. plan that would help lead to a supervised independence, and at the same time, guarantee the minority rights within Kosovo. And we would hope Ukraine would do the same thing.

Ioana.

Q Romania is a U.S. ally in Iraq and Afghanistan, but the Romanians are not met as allies on the United States territory.

THE PRESIDENT: Aha. (Laughter.) You're heading towards the visa issue, aren't you?

Q Yes. What Romania should do to enter in waiver visa program? And what do you recommend us, bilateral negotiations with the United States, or negotiations through European Union?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, thank you. (Laughter.) Very tricky question. (Laughter.) You ready? You better turn that thing up because I'm going to give you a whopper of an answer. (Laughter.)

Q Give me the news, I hope. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Yes. Now, first of all, it is hard for me to justify to the citizens of Romania that they can serve alongside our troops in major theaters in the war against extremists, and not be able to have -- be treated like other members of the EU, as far as visa waiver, and I know that. And it's difficult for citizens to understand that.

But we're still dealing with a -- you know, it is -- we're adjusting law based upon previous practice. And the law needed to change, reflecting the modern era, and it did change. Congress did change the capacity for -- to have a new look at visa waiver. But there are some requirements. And my advice is for the Romanian government to negotiate bilaterally with the United States in order to solve this problem.

There are other countries in your neighborhood that are making good progress toward being granted visa waiver. And I would strongly urge your leaders to take a look at what they have done, and then interface with our officials. And I'll, of course, be talking of this with the President and the Prime Minister when I'm there.

Q Thank you very much.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Yes, sir.

Q Mr. President, Croatian NATO membership bid, and steadfast support of your administration for that ambition was a centerpiece of the bilateral relations between Croatia and USA last seven or eight years. And will it now, if Croatia became a NATO member, and relations will be elevated to the higher level of allies -- can we expect to see more importance will be attached to the economic cooperation, U.S. investment in Croatia in the future?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, our relationships tend not to be -- they tend to be multi-dimensional and not just based upon one aspect or another. And I believe strongly in free trade and the movement of investment. And Croatia occupies a crucial part -- a crucial space in an important part of the world. And of course we want to enhance trade.

A lot of Americans need to learn more about Croatia, although there are about a million Croatian Americans here. And there's going to be all kinds of opportunities. Of course, those opportunities will be advantaged if the government makes rational decisions on, for example, good investment laws. In other words, there's competition for investment dollars, in this case, or investment euros, or investment whatevers. And therefore, the laws need to be transparent, the rule of law consistent, the government obviously clean, so that the main risk for an invested currency is not government risk, it is the risk of the enterprise itself.

And therefore, to answer your question, yes, of course we want to have all kinds of different aspects of our relationship flourish with Croatia. But in terms of investing, it's going to be up to the government to make decisions to make sure the investment climate is good.

Q Thank you.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q Mr. President?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, Thomas.

Q -- very formal. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Okay, Tom.

Q You mentioned in your preamble that it is important for NATO to honor its obligations to Afghanistan. There has been some criticism of NATO'S performance in Afghanistan from Washington. In recent days, Nicholas Sarkozy,

your new friend -- (laughter) -- has promised another 1,000 troops for Afghanistan.

THE PRESIDENT: Today.

Q Yes. Is there any sense that on that battlefield and indeed, beyond, France is now emerging as your greatest ally?

THE PRESIDENT: I have always said that the relationship with the United Kingdom is a special relationship. And that relationship was never as special as it was during times of conflict -- whether it be the relationship in the past between, like, Roosevelt and Churchill, or whether it be the current relationship, more modern relationship between Tony Blair and myself. And so, your question, "our greatest ally" -- it's going to be hard for any nation to trump Great Britain as our -- United Kingdom as our greatest ally.

Having said that, no question the relationship is changing for the better, and President Sarkozy gets a lot of credit for that. I like him personally. He's an interesting man. He is a highly energetic, decisive person, who is not interested in creating divisions between -- in the transatlantic alliance, but is interested in making sure that not only are bilateral relations are good, but the transatlantic alliance meets the threats.

And his statement about commitment to -- French troops to Afghanistan is a very important preamble to the NATO conference. It will pretty much ensure that this conference is a successful conference, because nations will watch very carefully; when you combine our commitment, the Canadian commitment, the British commitment and the French commitment of troops that will be in harm's way, it is a strong statement that NATO understands the threats, understands the challenges, and is willing to rise to them.

Okay, everybody, it's been a joyous experience. And for you? It's a beauty. (Laughter.) Okay.

Q And about Russia?

THE PRESIDENT: I thought we said two question apiece.

Q In your opinion, what are the prospects for democracy in Russia, in Medvedev --

THE PRESIDENT: I haven't met President Medvedev yet. I may have met him once, but I haven't had a talk to him, President-to-President, obviously. He's not even the President yet. I'm looking forward to meeting him. I am - have you put out the word yet?

MR. HADLEY: No.

THE PRESIDENT: Are you going to today?

MR. HADLEY: I am.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, okay. So I'm going to go to Russia. I've been invited to Russia. President Putin has invited me to Russia. You're the first to hear it -- so you can hustle out of here and put it on the wires. This is no longer off the record. Steve is going to come and brief it at 3:30 p.m. -- 3:15 p.m. President Putin has invited me to go to Sochi. And it's to discuss the strategic agreement, the crucial part of which is missile defense.

Condi Rice and Bob Gates had a good visit with the President and counterparts on this very issue -- and hopefully, that we can advance our dialogue so, at some point in time, we can reach an agreement on these important matters: Proliferation matters -- I know we've got agreement on Iran, and that is that Iran should not have the capacity to enrich, and that I supported the Russian efforts to convince the Iranians that they didn't need to learn how to enrich because he -- Putin -- was willing to provide enriched uranium for a civilian nuclear power plant. Therefore, no need to enrich, which I thought was a smart move and supported.

So there's an area where we'll continue to have discussions. And I called President-elect Medvedev and reminded him -- and congratulated him for getting elected, and reminded him that -- of some of the comments he

made about rule law and transparency, and can't remember exactly everything he said, but it sounded very progressive. And I said, we're listening very carefully to your words, and I appreciated your speech, and looking forward to working with you to help accomplish those objectives.

But I have yet to work with him, obviously, President-to-President. He hasn't been sworn in. So check back in with me after I've had a couple of meetings with him.

Q When are you going to Russia?

THE PRESIDENT: Day after Croatia. We haven't worked the details yet.

MR. HADLEY: We have not worked the details yet.

THE PRESIDENT: My crack advisor here is giving me -- (laughter.)

MR. HADLEY: Clearly, we intend to accept. We're going to have to work the details out.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, we intend to accept. In other words, there's an invitation out there, and this is really -- the way to look at this is a follow-up to Condi and Bob Gates's meeting -- which is good. Romania and other nations would hope that the United States would have good relations with Russia, and it's important that we have good relations with Russia, we can find common interests.

On the other hand, there are areas where we have been able to be in a position where I've expressed my disagreements with President Putin on different matters related to their democracy. And my strategy all along is to keep relations such that he will actually listen to what I have to say. So when you hear people say, "George Bush has got good relations with Vladimir Putin," there's a reason why. Because if you're -- in order to have somebody listen to you, they got to at least have an open mind, and it's hard to have an open mind if the only thing you're doing is try to blast away on a regular basis about your disagreements publicly. I've chosen not to do that.

Therefore, I'm optimistic we can reach accord on very important matters. I think a lot of people in Europe would have a deep sigh of relief if we're able to reach an accord on missile defense. And hopefully we can. One of the things that, hopefully, is clear to the Russian side is that this system is not aimed at Russia. After all, it doesn't take many missiles to overwhelm the kind of system we're talking about. And Russia has got plenty of missiles if they want to overwhelm. This is really aimed at -- a potential missile launch, for example, out of the Middle East. And therefore, I think it makes sense for us to be able to be in a position if people so choose to share information, and fully understand the operational activities of a system so as to build confidence.

So we'll see how it goes. I'm looking forward to it.

Q Do you think President Putin continues to pull the strings?

THE PRESIDENT: You know, I just don't know. It's an interesting question. That's speculative.

Q It's what we do for a living. (Laughter.)

THE PRESIDENT: Not me. (Laughter.)

Thank you all. Enjoyed it.

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