

Palestinian Authority/Israel

Q. Last question, Mr. President. Near East, don't you fear that if sooner than later, Mahmoud Abbas and Ariel Sharon don't reach a global peace agreement based on land for peace, that all this bunch of Islamic group terrorists, Hamas, Jihad, Hezbollah, might try to get rid of Mahmoud Abbas and get in total war with Israel?

The President. No, that's a concern, of course. And I'm impressed by President Abbas' leadership. We want to support him as he moves forward to develop a Palestinian state based upon democratic institutions. And I think we're making great progress. The good news is, is that Europe and Russia and the United Nations, the United States all understands that we've got to make progress to head off these terrorists so that they don't—so they can't capture the imaginations of the Palestinian people anymore. In other words, terrorism is not the path to peace and security and freedom and hope, and that's democracy. And we're making great progress.

And I look forward to talking to President Chirac about the progress we're making and remind him, as well as the people of France, that we'll stay engaged. The United States of America sees a settlement within reach, like I said in my State of the Union, and therefore if you can see it in reach, it means all the more reason to stay fully engaged in the peace process.

Q. I wish you all the very best, Mr. President.

The President. Thank you, sir. Looking forward to it. Thank you, sir.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 10:34 a.m. in the Map Room at the White House for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to President Jacques Chirac of France; President Bashar al-Asad of Syria; President Vladimir Putin of Russia; and President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) of the Palestinian Authority. The interviewer referred to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Interview With VRT Belgian Public Broadcasting

February 18, 2005

Europe-U.S. Relations

Q. Mr. President, it's your first international trip in your second term. Does it mean that transatlantic relations are a top priority now for you? And how are you going to restore the European confidence in the American politics?

The President. Yes. No, the transatlantic relations have always been a top priority, because of all the nations in the world, we share common values—America is more likely to share common values of peace and freedom and human rights and human dignity. And we've had our differences, obviously. But that's okay. The key is to move past differences and to focus on how we can leave behind a legacy of peace and freedom for our children and grandchildren.

And so I'm looking forward to it. I want to thank the Belgian Government and the Belgian people for hosting the meetings, the NATO meetings and the EU meetings. And Laura and I are anxious to come. It's—we've got very fond memories of our first trip to Belgium. This is a chance to reconfirm a vital relationship and to say there's so much we can do, whether it be in the Middle East or joining together to fight disease and poverty and terror. There's a lot we can do.

Iraq

Q. Iraq is a big issue, of course. During your trip, Belgium—NATO joined in for the training program. Belgium, well, they only are contributing financially. Are you going to insist on more support from a country as Belgium and from Europe?

The President. No, not from—listen, the Government of Belgium makes the decision that they're comfortable with. And all I can ask is—say, “Thanks for considering it. Thank you for the financial contribution, and if you're comfortable supporting the training missions with troops, fine. If not, you're still our friend.”

Q. Yes, especially after the opposition—the Belgian opposition against Iraqi war.

The President. Absolutely. I mean, I understand that. No, we can't—I don't believe

we should ask people to do things that their people don't want them to do. And in democracies, the Government reflects the desires of the people. That's why I'm such a big believer in democracy.

Now, having said that, the vote of the Iraqi people should say loud and clear that democracy is on the move, and we've got to work together. And that's what I'm going to talk to NATO, to make sure they continue the training missions, as well as the EU that helped with the elections, as well as figuring out ways that we can work together to help this new fledgling democracy grow. Because it's in our interest—it's in the Belgian interest and the U.S. interest that democracy take hold in the Middle East.

Iran

Q. Working together will be your big message over in Europe, but there is also Iran. Now that Syria pledged support for Iran, how far will you support the European diplomatic efforts to solve that issue? And can you exclude American military action?

The President. Well, listen, first of all, you never want a President to say "never." But military action is certainly not—it's never the President's first choice. Diplomacy is always the President's first—at least my first choice.

And we've got a common goal, and that is that Iran—Iran should not have a nuclear weapon. That's what we have said—America has said. That's what the Brits have said, the French have said, the Germans have said, when they send their Foreign Ministers in to talk to the Iranians. In other words, there's a common mission.

And I look forward to kind of making sure we continue to speak with one voice. The—and it's in our interest they not have a nuclear weapon. And so we want to support the European efforts, and I applaud the European efforts to continue to send a clear message to the Iranians. And we want to be—we want to—we will consult, like we have been, to make sure that we fully understand where we stand to achieve that goal. And I think we—listen, I think if we continue to speak with one voice and not let them split us up and keep the pressure on them, we can achieve the objective.

Central Africa

Q. Mr. President, freedom through democracy is the centerpiece of your politics. The Belgian Government feels that they're doing the same in Central Africa and Congo. How important is the election process over there, since Darfur and AIDS seem to be more of a priority for your administration?

The President. Well, no, I appreciate that very much. First of all, I want to applaud the Belgian Government's understanding that you can achieve peace through freedom and democracy. I mean, it's very important that a country that has benefiting from democracy, like Belgium, not ever abandon that for others.

Secondly, we have been helpful in the Congo. My former Secretary of State, Colin Powell, and I have discussed this issue a lot. Condi Rice is very concerned about not only the Congo but other countries on the continent of Africa. And we will work with our friends to not only fight HIV/AIDS—and obviously, that Darfur—we've got to be very careful about Darfur and work together to solve that problem. But as well, it's to support our friends like the Belgian Government in Congo and will.

And all they've got to do is ask. And I'm the kind of person, if we can't help you, I'll say, "We can't help you." But if we can help you, we will. Interesting enough, there's a wonderful movie called "Hotel Rwanda," by the way. And the Belgian citizen who ran the hotel came to visit me yesterday in the Oval Office. He's a spectacular guy. I said, "You're a hero." And he said, "No, I'm not a hero." I said, "Well, you are to a lot of people," for being such a humanitarian and drawing—you know, to helping draw the world's attention to what it means to go through a genocide. And free nations must work together to prevent genocide.

President's Upcoming Visit to Brussels

Q. Can the Belgian Government read a positive gesture in your first visit to Brussels now?

The President. Oh, they already have. Listen, I'm absolutely convinced that the—His Majesty—my visit with His Majesty and Her Majesty will be great, and the Prime Minister, who I've known for a long time,

will be good. I'm looking forward to this. I really am. It's—I remember going to the chocolate shop and—which was not diplomacy, it was pure commercialism on my part. But it was kind of a sweet reminder of our trip there, and I'm just confident that the trip will be equally as good this time.

Q. Thank you so much, Mr. President, for these kind words.

The President. Good luck to you.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 10:41 a.m. in the Map Room at the White House for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to Paul Rusesabagina, whose actions to shelter refugees during the 1994 Rwanda genocide were depicted in the film "Hotel Rwanda"; and King Albert II, Queen Paolo, and Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt of Belgium. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Interview With ARD-German Television

February 18, 2005

Agenda for the President's Upcoming Visit to Europe

Q. Mr. President, your visit to Europe is an important gesture. Now what many people wonder is, beyond the style, what substance you're going to add to the—invigorating the transatlantic relationship? Schroeder has just proposed a NATO reform, to have a forum to discuss policy. What do you think about things like that?

The President. Well, I—look, I mean, first of all, I think NATO is vital, and I look forward to reminding him that the U.S. position is that NATO is a vital institution, and that—but so is the EU. And we look forward to working with the EU.

In terms of—and I think it's a legitimate question for people to say, "Look, it's fine to have nice words, but it's, what can we do together? What can we do together to make the world a better place?" We can continue to fight disease and hunger, which we will. The United States is actively involved on the continent of Africa on HIV/AIDS and wants to work with our European friends through the Global Fund to do so. We can work on trade matters, a benefit to the citizens of the U.S. and to Europe that there be active

trade. And equally importantly, we can work to spread freedom and peace.

And so I'm going to talk about Middle Eastern peace, my vision about two states living side by side in peace, Israel and Palestine. I'm going to talk about Iran. I'll talk about Syria. I'll talk about Lebanon. I mean, there's a lot of things—concrete things—that we need to be working on so that we can say when it's all said and done, the world is more peaceful for our children.

Iran and Syria

Q. You mentioned Iran and Syria, two real hot spots, two conflicts in the making. Now, 70 percent of all Germans are convinced, according to a latest poll, that you are already planning a military action against Iran. Now, what do you say to disperse these fears? You know that Blair, Schroeder, and Bush [sic] would like you to play a more active role in the diplomatic—

The President. No, I know—listen, we're playing—look, first of all, I hear all these rumors about military attacks, and it's just not the truth. We want diplomacy to work. And I believe diplomacy can work so long as the Iranians don't divide Europe and the United States. And the common goal is for them not to have a nuclear weapon. It's in the interests of the German people and the American people and all people for the Iranians not to develop that nuclear weapon.

And so I want to applaud and will applaud Gerhard and the other leaders for sending a clear message to Iran. The Iranians need to know—they know what they need to do. And so what they're trying to do is kind of wiggle out. They're trying to say, "Well, we won't do anything, because America is not involved." But America is involved. We're in close consultation with our friends. We're on the board of the IAEA. And we will continue to work with friends and allies to make it clear.

The other thing Iran's got to do—two other things they've got to do, is stop exporting terror through Hezbollah, which could be a devastating blow to the peace process between Israel and the Palestinian people, and they ought to open up their country to more democracy and freedom, just like we do in the United States and Germany, give