

Interview With Gavin Esler of the British Broadcasting Corporation May 27, 1994

Foreign Policy

Mr. Esler. Mr. President, you are going to Europe to celebrate this great anniversary, the 50-year anniversary of the grand alliance against fascism and tyranny. But it's said that the present generation of leaders, yourself included, have somehow not got the vision of the Churchills and the Roosevelts to lead us into the next century. How do you respond with some ideas about your own vision?

The President. Well, first, I don't think that's accurate or a fair judgment. I think we're all deeply grateful to the generation of D-Day and the Second War for what they did and the freedom they bought us. I think we're also grateful to those who fought and won the cold war. And what we have to do now is to work out how we're going to face the challenges of the post-cold-war era and what our responsibilities are. The United States is still prepared to lead in a world in which our concerns are clear—security, prosperity, democracy, and human rights—and in which we know there is an interdependence, a level of cooperation required, because we want to maintain a discipline that was not there before the Second World War, a discipline that was not there before World War II, a discipline that will permit us to work on these problems, contain those we can't control, and prevent the whole world from becoming engulfed again.

And that is what we are attempting to do in working with the British, the French, and others in Bosnia, what we are attempting to do in leading NATO to take action out of area for the first time and trying to support the attempt to secure peace in Bosnia. That's what we're trying to do with the Partnership For Peace. Eighteen nations have now signed up to cooperate with NATO in a way that gives us the opportunity, for the first time since nation states came across the European continent, to unify Europe rather than have it divided.

So, I'm quite encouraged, actually, about the way things are going. We're engaging Russia; we're engaging the other republics of the former Soviet Union. We are working hard there. In Asia, the United States is engaging Japan, is engaging China, is engaging a whole lot of other

Pacific powers in an attempt to preserve the peace there. In our own hemisphere now, 33 of the 35 nations in Central and Latin America are now governed by democracies. And we are working together as never before. So, I think that we are trying to forge this newer world. I admit there are ragged edges and uncertainties, but that was the case after the Second World War for a few years as well.

Bosnia

Mr. Esler. Well, one of those ragged edges is Bosnia itself. You're going to a Europe which, for the first time in 50 years, is at war with itself. You're the Commander in Chief of 1.6 million men and women under arms. Why is it so difficult to do what Roosevelt did, to send some of those men to put the fire out in Europe?

The President. Well, first of all, Roosevelt sent those people after Pearl Harbor, after there was an attack and after Germany declared war on the United States, when the whole future of Europe was at stake.

What has happened here is that European nations under the U.N. mandate have gone into Bosnia not for the purpose of ending the war but for the purpose of preserving the U.N. mission of preserving some limitation on the fighting and some humanitarian aid. We have acted in support of that in several ways. We have provided through our air power the longest humanitarian airlift in history, now longer than the Berlin airlift. We have worked hard to get our NATO allies to agree to use not only the threat but the reality of air power to stop the war in Bosnia from spreading to the air. We have shot down planes in aid of that objective to protect Sarajevo and other safe areas. And we are aggressively involved with our European allies in trying to get a peace agreement.

I do not think it is an appropriate thing for the United States to send ground troops to Bosnia to become involved in the conflict itself. Now, if we reach an agreement in which NATO has a responsibility to enforce the agreement along lines agreed to by the parties, that's a different matter altogether. The United States still has troops in the Middle East enforcing the agreement reached by Israel and Egypt at

the Camp David accord. I think that is a different thing.

If we're talking about limiting the conflict, we have troops now in Macedonia, in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, designed to limit the conflict. I think that that is the appropriate thing for us. I think the Europeans have done the right thing in putting their troops in in the U.N. mandate to try to limit the fighting. But in the end, these parties are going to have to make an agreement. Otherwise, there's a risk that they'll collapse the U.N. mission. They're going to have to decide that they cannot win, either side, by fighting and make an agreement. They reached an agreement tentatively before the terrible problems in Gorazde. And we need to get them back to the negotiating table.

Mr. Esler. Your critics say that you've been inconsistent in your Bosnia policy. Some Western diplomats have said to me that on the 17th, 18th, and 19th of April you seem to have had three different Bosnian policies. You raised the possibility of discussing lifting the trade embargo on the Serbs. You talked about lifting the arms embargo on the Muslims. In any event, you didn't do any of those things. Can you see why your friends are perplexed by this because you seemed to have changed your mind?

The President. A lot of times people have said things in this Bosnian thing, not only about me but about others, as a way of shifting to others the responsibility they have for their own frustrations. Let's just be frank about this. I did not raise the prospect of any kind of unilateral lifting in the embargo on Serbia. I said that any discussion of that, any discussion of that, could not proceed until there was some sort of cessation of hostilities and that I personally would not favor changing the position of the United States, which is that that embargo should not be lifted until (a) there is a peace agreement in force in Bosnia and (b) some other changes have occurred in Serbia. I have not changed our position.

With regard to lifting the arms embargo, I have always thought that the arms embargo was unfair to the Bosnian Government, always. That has been my position from day one. I have also always thought that the United States should not unilaterally lift it, from day one. Our European allies have not favored lifting it for good reasons. They have soldiers on the ground there. There are British soldiers in Bosnia; they do not want them subject to attack, to capture

because the arm's embargo has been lifted. Therefore, I do not think the global community will vote to lift the arms embargo unless the U.N. mission collapses.

What I said about the arms embargo was quite simple, and that is that I think it is a possibility if the U.N. mission does not succeed. I said what I did in hopes that we could spur the Serbs to understand that they are going to have to make a reasonable agreement or fight a very long war. I don't think any of that is inconsistent with the position I have taken. The problem is—let's face it, the problem is everybody is so frustrated about Bosnia that it's easy in our frustrations to point our fingers at each other. I don't think that's very helpful. I believe that we have a common policy. I believe that we are working very closely with our friends in Europe and, by the way, with the Russians, who have been quite constructive in this. And my position is that as long as the Europeans are willing to be part of the U.N. mission and as long as the Russians are willing to follow a responsible course in their relationship with the Serbs, we ought to try to make a decent peace.

Northern Ireland

Mr. Esler. Could we turn to Ireland now, Mr. President; that's been a bone of contention with Britain. Was your decision to allow Gerry Adams in here, in retrospect, a mistake because the IRA have still failed to endorse the Downing Street declaration on the peace process?

The President. I don't think we can know yet. The decision to let him come was plainly taking a risk for peace. I think that Sinn Fein ought to renounce violence and ought to join the peace process. I'm very frankly pleased that at long last they issued their questions and the British Government provided answers and all that's been published. And I'm hoping that after the June 12 elections, that we'll see some real progress there. But I don't think we can know yet whether the decision was or was not a mistake in terms of what will happen over the long run. I think plainly it was designed to further the debate, and I hope it did that.

Media Criticism

Mr. Esler. Finally, Mr. President, you go to Europe at a time when you're facing the kind of criticism, sleazy criticism, at home and in the British papers that no President has ever

had to face before. How distracting is it for you that people are raking up financial dealings and personal affairs going back years?

The President. Well, unfortunately that's become part of the daily fare of American public life now because of certain extremist groups and because now it's part of our media life, like unfortunately it's a part of your media life. But I know that the charges are bogus and that they'll ultimately be disproved or they'll die of their own weight. And they don't take up a lot of our time and attention here.

My job is to lead this country in its own path of internal revival and engaging with our friends and allies. And I can't really afford to be distracted by it. I just get up here every day and think about what an incredible historic opportunity and what an obligation it is, and I do my best to fulfill the obligation.

I will say this, I'm ecstatic about going back to Britain again after some years of absence

and having a chance to go back to Oxford again after the D-Day ceremonies are complete. The United States has no closer ally than Great Britain. And even though we may have some differences from time to time, we mustn't let those differences get in our way. We have too much at stake. We have too much work to do in building this new world. As you point out, there are still a lot of problems out there, but we're going to deal with them, and we're going to do fine.

Mr. Esler. Mr. President, thank you very much for talking to me. And I hope you enjoy your visit to Britain.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview began at 2:40 p.m. in the Cabinet Room at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Gerry Adams, leader of Sinn Féin.

Interview With the Italian Media

May 27, 1994

Giuseppe Lugato. Mr. President, I want to thank you, first of all, for this great opportunity. I want to remember that this is the first time that a President of the United States gives an interview to two Italian journalists only. So thank you, and our first question, sir.

Italian Government

Silvia Kramar. My first question to you, Mr. President, is about Italy. There has been great many political changes in the last few months. We have a brand new government, and we actually call it the beginning of the second republic. My question to you is what do you think about this new government? What is your impression? And also, what do you think will be the future of the relationships between the United States and Italy?

The President. Well, first let me say a word about the outgoing government. I think Prime Minister Ciampi did a fine job of bridging the period of transition and giving a sense of stability and security and confidence to the rest of us about Italy and what was going on. We all followed the elections with great interest. As you know, your system is quite a bit different

from ours, so here in America we were very interested to see how the election would come out and then how a government would be formed.

I haven't met with your new Prime Minister, but I am looking forward to it. The Italian Foreign Minister was here just a few days ago to assure the United States of the continuing commitment of Italy to the sort of partnership we have had. The Italian-American relationship is extremely important for our ability to work for peace in Bosnia, for our ability to maintain a stability in the entire region, and for our long-term economic partnerships as well. So I am looking forward to it, and I am basically quite optimistic. I'm hopeful.

Mr. Lugato. Sir, you were just quoting the new Prime Minister. Can I ask you what is the perception that you have of Mr. Berlusconi? That at the same time he is a successful businessman, number one Italian TV tycoon, and Prime Minister. Now, many in Italy, they think that's too much, and they think that in the United States this couldn't happen.

The President. Couldn't happen?