

Interview With Tom Brokaw of the National Broadcasting Corporation  
Aboard Air Force One  
May 4, 1999

*Russian Peace Initiative for Kosovo*

*Mr. Brokaw.* Mr. President, diplomatic flurry may be an overstatement—there's something percolating, obviously. Is there anything that you find encouraging at all in what we've seen in the last couple of days with the Russian connection?

*The President.* Yes. I am encouraged because, first of all, I think it's a good thing for the Russians to be aggressively involved in trying to find a diplomatic solution, as long as it's a real solution to the problem. The conditions that we and our NATO Allies have laid out are not designed to win some victory over Serbia; they're designed to establish the minimum necessary for the mission to succeed, for the Kosovars to go home to live in security and autonomy.

To do that, you've got to get the Serb forces out, and you have to have an international force there with NATO at its core, so it will work, so the Serbs will come back, so the armed elements within the Kosovar Albanians—excuse me, so the Albanians will come back, the Kosovars will come back, and so the armed elements there will disarm and will accept the peace.

Now, that's what's necessary to happen. And I think if the Russians get to the point where they can truly embrace that position and argue it to the Serbs, I think that will be very helpful.

*Mr. Brokaw.* But does Chernomyrdin buy your scenario?

*The President.* Well, what he's tried to do, obviously, is to assess what he thinks Mr. Milosevic will buy. But there's a subtext here I think is important to get out, too, which is this shows that the Russians are more than willing, themselves, to be involved in a peace-keeping force, and that others coming out of that neck of the woods who share religious and ethnic ties to the Serbs may be willing to participate, as well, which will give the right feel and look and substance to this. You know, I've always said we would only go in there if we were permitted to protect the Serb minority as well as the Kosovar Albanians.

So I think that this is basically helpful. But I don't want to oversell it because there's been no kind of diplomatic breakthrough here. It cannot be a bad thing to have a man of Mr. Chernomyrdin's stature, his obvious closeness to President Yeltsin, vigorously doing what he's doing out there. I think that's important.

*Mr. Brokaw.* But there's not even a small light at the end of the tunnel at this point?

*The President.* I wouldn't say that. I think the Russians have a much clearer understanding of why we have taken the position we have taken. And as they've gotten into the details of it, I think they understand what it would take actually to have this work. As I said to Mr. Chernomyrdin, I said, "You know, if we try to do this the way Mr. Milosevic originally said he wanted it done, we'd be back here in 8 months having the same meeting all over again."

*Mr. Brokaw.* If you were an Albanian refugee—and there are now about a million, we think, altogether—would you go back home without the United States as the guarantor of your safety?

*The President.* No. I wouldn't go back home without the United States and NATO, without our allies being involved there, not after what they've been through.

And it's very important—I keep saying this to the American people—it's very important, you can't divorce what happened in Kosovo from what happened for 4 years in Bosnia. These people know what not just ethnic cleansing but religious cleansing is. The Muslims know what they've been subject to. And they want to go home, and it's soon enough from the expulsions that they will go home eagerly if they know they're going to be safe, if they know they're going to have their autonomy.

And I think it's just imperative to the Russians, the more they come to grips with what it would take to make this work—instead of thinking about winners and losers—what would it take to make this work? Because they say they're for having the Kosovars go home, being safe, having autonomy—they understand that—

then these conditions are what is necessary to make it work.

You say, well, what's in it for the Serbs? Well, first of all, they shouldn't be rewarded for ethnic cleansing. But secondly, there is something in it. What's in it is that the Russians and others can be involved in the peacekeeping force, so it's not just the United States and NATO. Secondly, there's going to have to be a huge effort not only at rebuilding but at building a whole different future for the Balkans and southeastern Europe that bring these folks together around common economic goals. None of that can happen until this gets done.

*Expenses Incurred in Kosovo Action*

*Mr. Brokaw.* Do you think that the United States—do you think that the American people have a full appreciation of just how long and expensive now our investment in the Balkans will be as a result of what's happened just in the last few months?

*The President.* Well, I believe that they—first of all, the lion's share of our expense is being borne out because they're carrying a majority of the military burden, and we're paying quite a lot for the humanitarian assistance, which I think the American people want us to do, and the American citizens have been very generous in their private donations. I believe that the Europeans will carry the lion's share of the burden, the rebuilding and building an economic unit there that can relate to the EU and grow together.

But it's in our interest to participate in that. That's a lot cheaper than having another European war. This is a lot cheaper than having another European war of the kind that we saw in the 20th century. And so I wish we didn't have to spend the money on this. I'll be happy to support contributing to the reconstruction of the area, and I think it will repay itself many times over in avoided problems and in new economic partners.

*Mr. Brokaw.* A lot of people in the United States are now saying, how in the world can we have the Russians represent our interests there? We've spent 50 years trying to keep them out of the Balkans; now we're inviting them

in. It's not in the interest of the United States to do that, they say.

*The President.* But it is, if we all have the same goals. The Russians have worked with us side-by-side, our militaries, in Bosnia. We have worked well there together. We have served in the same area. The Russians have been willing to work with an American commander; they have related well to each other. The Russians have a relationship with NATO. We've done joint training exercises together.

So if the Russians, who, after all, are now a democracy, will embrace the same objectives and will go in there in a way that ensures that there's no discrimination against the Serb minority in Kosovo, we can make a lot of progress, and we can work together.

That's what we want. I've been working for a partnership for a democratic Russia since the day I got here, and I believe before I was here—I think that's what President Bush wanted to achieve with President Yeltsin. That enables us to keep reducing our nuclear stockpile. That enables us to secure the safety of their nuclear weapons. That enables us to work with them in positive ways to keep the transfer of dangerous technology from countries that shouldn't have it.

So all these things I think are very important. There is a way that we could get a very large benefit here by strengthening our partnership with Russia over the long run. But the basic conditions have to be met, because without the basic conditions being met, the mission will not succeed; we'll never get the Kosovars back home; we'll never have real security and autonomy. We'll have continuing military uprisings among the Kosovars, unless the basic conditions are met.

NOTE: The interview began at 6:36 p.m. aboard Air Force One en route to Brussels, Belgium. In his remarks, the President referred to Viktor Chernomyrdin, Special Envoy and former Prime Minister, and President Boris Yeltsin of Russia; and President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro). The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on May 6. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.