

Interview With Tom Brokaw of the National Broadcasting Corporation in
Spangdahlem, Germany
May 5, 1999

Appreciation of the Military

Mr. Brokaw. What do you get out of a trip like this, when you come over here and see these people and all the armaments and all this emotion that you, as Commander in Chief, obviously are responsible for?

The President. Well, first of all, it's very reassuring because you see how hard they train, how hard they prepare, and how well they execute. So, in that sense, it's reassuring.

Secondly, I get to thank them and to tell them that the American people are with them and grateful for what they're doing. And of course, this morning I got the very important briefing from General Clark and General Naumann about where we are in this campaign, what we need to do, and what their recommendations are.

So from a purely military point of view, in addition to trying to solidify the unity of our coalition—meeting with the Belgian and the German Prime Ministers—and looking at the humanitarian effort and seeing the refugees, seeing the service people is very, very important. And of course, by coming here, the American people see what they're doing more because of your coverage of it.

Mr. Brokaw. This is a real evolution for you. Like so many people in your generation, you came of age when there was an unpopular war, and you had mixed feelings at best about the role of the military in our lives and so on. Did you ever think that you would find yourself running a war as Commander in Chief in those days?

The President. No. Of course, I never thought I'd be President, and I certainly never thought, therefore, about this. But when I became President and because I hadn't been in the military myself and because I'd been a Governor and, therefore, had never been on the Armed Services Committee in the Senate or the House or otherwise directly dealt with defense policy, I determined to spend an awful lot of time on it. And I have spent major, major chunks of time on bases all over the world and all over the United States and at the Pentagon in briefings learning about how the military works,

learning about how these weapon systems work, learning about the human challenges of military life today, and trying to make sure that these people have the support they need to do their job. I think the American people almost universally do understand that they're not only very admirable people but they are very, very good at what they do.

Success of Kosovo Action

Mr. Brokaw. Military people talk about the fog of combat when they're fighting. Isn't there also a kind of fog of running a war? Didn't you expect to be farther along at this point? We're now 6 weeks into the operation.

The President. Well, I didn't really have expectations about the timing because I think the timing depends upon things that are, to some extent, beyond our control. That is, the timing depends upon the weather. Even though we've now flown 15,000 sorties, not all of them could deliver their payload because of the weather. The timing depends upon the extent to which Mr. Milosevic is willing to see his country and his military broken and taken into the ground in order to maintain this campaign of ethnic cleansing.

I was just convinced that we had a strategy that would work, that we could do it at an acceptable cost, and that we had to stay with it until it did work. And I still feel that way. I feel quite good about it. And I feel more strongly that way, now that I had a long and detailed briefing from General Clark and General Naumann today. And that was certainly their recommendation and their feeling, that the campaign is working, that we are making progress on the military front, that the targets are being hit, and that they're having an impact, and that we need to stick with it. And that's certainly what I believe.

Mr. Brokaw. General Clark was very upbeat. He said we're winning, and then he said General—then he said that Milosevic is losing his leadership capability. Did you get real evidence of that?

The President. I think he has, first of all, concrete evidence of the things that are being

destroyed there, the ammunition capacity, the repair of weapons capacity, the energy capacity, and any other number of targets. And they're beginning to have more success now going after the Serb military, even though they're pretty clever at hiding.

But I think also, these people hear things. You know, they're here on the ground; they're in combat; they're also in contact with people all over this region; and they just have a sense that it's beginning to change things. And I believe that to be true. But I also believe that we have to stick with the strategy.

I think the fact that our soldiers were released, and then Mr. Rugova was released today, is an indication that Mr. Milosevic hopes to, by doing this, put some daylight among the Allies, split us apart a little bit, and hopefully to have some sort of an interruption of this campaign on terms that he can still claim some victory for this ethnic cleansing. And I'm determined to see that that doesn't happen.

Mr. Brokaw. But do you have any hard evidence that he is losing in any way the grip that he has on power in that country?

The President. I don't think he's—no, I do not think he's losing his grip on power within Serbia, and I don't think that's what General Clark meant. I think what General Clark meant was that he was losing his ability to be certain that he could continue to control Kosovo. I do think we have some evidence of that, yes.

Kosovo and Vietnam

Mr. Brokaw. Defense Secretary Cohen said on "Meet The Press" on Sunday that they're prepared to go all the way until September if necessary in this campaign. That brings to mind what they were saying during Vietnam: It became necessary to destroy the country to save it. I mean, how much more damage can be done and still have something left?

The President. Well, I don't think we're going to destroy the country. We're doing our very best, and these pilots have risked their lives on more than one occasion to avoid doing collateral damage. Very often, for example, the weapons fired at the airplanes are fired from heavily populated urban areas. And in former times, without a second thought, our planes would have fired right in there at those weapons, knowing that they would kill a lot of civilians. They don't do that. They really risk a lot to

avoid destroying innocent civilians and to avoid destroying the country.

But I do believe that we now have 10 years of evidence—this is not the same thing as Vietnam—we have 10 years of evidence that this man has built a power base on convincing the Serb military that they have the right to kill, rape, destroy, and uproot the history and culture of the Muslim people in Kosovo and in Bosnia, and to a lesser extent, the Catholic people in Bosnia. And we stopped it in Bosnia, but we can reverse it in Kosovo, and the people can go home.

I think that—I realize that the average citizen in the street in Belgrade doesn't know what he's done. I don't believe they do. I believe that the truth has been kept from them. But we have to be prepared to pursue this campaign until it is clear that sticking with the strategy he has is more costly to him than meeting the conditions that we have laid down and looking forward to a different future for Serbia.

So it's not a conventional thing where there's one side's going to win and one side's going to lose because one faction will control a whole country. It's not Vietnam. It's not a civil war. It's not communism versus noncommunism. It's about one dictator's ability to throw a whole region in turmoil over the principle of ethnic cleansing. And it is a problem around the world. We have the capacity to stop it and reverse it here, and I think we have to do it. It's not just the United States; it's 19 countries.

Duration of Kosovo Action

Mr. Brokaw. But based on what you heard here today, do you think that this war will have to go all the way through until September?

The President. I think that the clearer we are in our determination to do that, the more likely we are to see it terminated before then. But I'm perfectly prepared to do it. When we started it, I never thought it would be a 3-day wonder. I only—the only way this conflict could ever have been over in a few days is if Mr. Milosevic had seen that NATO was prepared to do this and, therefore, imagined what it would be like a month or 2 months or 3 months hence and decided to spare his people and his military and his political and economic apparatus that burden. He made a different calculation. He was always capable of doing that, and so we have to do what we have to do.

But I think—I have always been—relaxed is the wrong word—but patient about the timetable. And I'm looking forward, frankly, to May and June and July, where the weather is much clearer and we'll be freer to pursue our strategy.

Mr. Brokaw. In the meantime, more refugees are coming out; we're getting closer to the cold-weather months. That's going to be an enormous problem, not only in the prosecution of the war in the meantime but what happens after that.

The President. Well, it is, but I think that—look at the difference in the timetable of what we're doing now and what happened in Bosnia, where it took NATO navigating—with difficult circumstances with the U.N. for a long time—from at least 1991 until 1995 to act. And by the time we acted, it was a good thing we did—we saved a lot of lives—but a lot of the refugees didn't come home or haven't yet.

Because we're moving now, I think the refugees will go home almost immediately when this is resolved. And that's a very good thing. That's a very important thing. And meanwhile, we're going to have to—all of us, the Europeans and the United States and Canada—we're going to have to spend the money and make the arrangements to care for the refugees. And we're going to have to be very sensitive not to put undue pressure on the daily life of Macedonia or of Albania, and we're going to have to work at it.

I already this morning, since NATO is heavily involved in the refugee issue—and you and I are going to see evidence of that in our next stop—we talked quite a lot about what we have to do on that. This is going to be a huge challenge for NATO, for the U.N. High Commission on Refugees, for the NGO's around the world that are helping us.

Espionage/European Stability

Mr. Brokaw. Let me ask you a couple of concluding, tough questions. Your critics say the Clinton doctrine is: We bomb the small countries, Iraq and Kosovo, but when the big countries begin to give us trouble, we turn the other way. China and nuclear secrets is the most recent example of that. Isn't that a bigger risk, really, to the long-term history of the United States than Kosovo?

The President. Well, first of all, I think that's apples and oranges. The Soviet Union spied on us all during the cold war. I don't recall President Truman or President Eisenhower or Presi-

dent Kennedy or President Johnson or President Nixon ever considering bombing Russia because of espionage. We didn't break off relationships with Israel when Israel was involved in espionage in ways that could have been quite damaging to us.

So I think that's a foolish thing. We should handle this espionage case the way we've handled every other espionage case since spying began. I believe that we have more to gain from working with the Chinese than from totally divorcing ourselves from them. So I don't think—that's apples and oranges.

NATO here has the capacity to stop and, I believe, to reverse ethnic cleansing. I believe that the threat that presents to the stability of Europe is very considerable. I believe the promise of a Europe that's undivided and at peace is what people have worked for for the last 50 years. And unless we fix the Balkans or at least give them a chance to fix their own future, not only by ending this terrible conflict and ethnic cleansing but also by building the region, then we won't have the Europe we want, and someone like you may have to write another book like you just wrote 50 years from now. So I consider this to be a very large issue.

I also believe that we have to increase the capacity of the world to stand against this. You know, after the horrible thing that happened in Rwanda, we've worked very hard to develop the African militaries and their capacity to cooperate and work with us and others to stop anything like that from happening again.

I think this whole, you know, hatred based on race, tribe, religion, ethnicity, is going to dominate a lot of the world in the next 30 years, and the United States has a deep interest in trying to stand against it.

President's Leadership

Mr. Brokaw. I have a question, Mr. President. It's not an easy one, but based on what we're seeing on Capitol Hill and other signs of it as well, in 1998, your job approval rating remained very high, but there were real questions about trustworthiness and credibility and so on even in the public. Has that made running this kind of operation more complicated for you?

The President. No. No. You know, the people on Capitol Hill will have to decide how they respond as Americans to their obligations here. But it hasn't been a problem. And the American people made clear in the election in 1998 who

they trusted and for what reason and what their priorities are. They hired us all to do their work, and they want their lives and their children and their future and their national interest put first. And that is what I have done, and that's what I'm doing today and what I intend to continue to do until my last day in office. And I think that those who do it will be supportive, and those who don't will have to deal with the consequences.

Quality of Life in the Military

Mr. Brokaw. Do you have anything else you want to say?

The President. No. I don't think so. He wanted to know if we wanted to say anything else. One thing that I think you might want to emphasize, and I don't know if you want to do it now or later, is there is one legitimate concern I have, which is that these people—ironically, the good economy has made it harder for us to keep a lot of these folks in the Air Force and in the Army.

Mr. Brokaw. Right.

The President. And there are so many opportunities for them, and they serve their country, and then it's easy for them to go out and make a lot more money doing something else. And one of the important things that I believe will be done, on a completely bipartisan basis, this year in the Congress is to raise pay, to improve retirement, to have reenlistment bonuses, to try to make sure that we can keep the good people we have. And we have downsized the military, but as a consequence, they have to do more missions in closer sequence, and they don't get the time off they used to get, so they work under enormous pressure.

Now, you could see from that crowd today, there's not a morale problem at this base. These people have high morale. They're proud of what they're doing. But they also have—I think the general here said, General Van Cleef said about 80 percent of these people are married. Many, many have small children. And so one of the concerns I have and one of the reasons I wanted to come out here and listen and talk to these folks is that we're working very hard—and as

I said, I don't think there's any partisan difference here at all—on a completely bipartisan basis, to try to give these folks the income, the quality of life, the stability that they need and to find ways to get more of those who do join to stay and more to join, even though there's a good economy and a low unemployment rate.

So that is a genuine challenge for us, but one that I have so far had only the highest compliments for the Congress and the members of both parties about how they're meeting it, because everybody knows it's a big issue.

Mr. Brokaw. It would be a huge item on the agenda, I would think, in 2000; don't you think?

The President. It depends on—well, it will be unless we are able to—

Mr. Brokaw. Head it off first—

The President. —yes, adequately address it now. But there has really been no partisan difference here. I mean, I proposed the first substantial increase in defense spending since, oh, the middle of President Reagan's second term, this year, largely to address not only some of our equipment needs but mostly the people needs. And you know, you get the lowest unemployment rate in 30 years and you get incomes rising at the highest rate in 25 years, it's hard to keep folks, and you have more competition for people coming right out of school. So we're just going to have to work at it.

NOTE: The interview began at 2:50 p.m. at Spangdahlem Air Base. In his remarks, the President referred to Gen. Wesley K. Clark, USA, Supreme Allied Commander Europe; Gen. Klaus Naumann, chairman, North Atlantic Treaty Organization Military Committee; Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene of Belgium; Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of Germany; President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro); Ibrahim Rugova, leader, Democratic League of Kosovo; and Brig. Gen. Scott Van Cleef, USAF, Commander, 52d Air Expeditionary Wing. 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.