

Interview With Jim Lehrer of PBS' "NewsHour"

June 11, 1999

Mr. Lehrer. And now to President Clinton. Mr. President, welcome.

The President. Thank you, Jim. I'm glad to be here.

Balkan Peace Process

Mr. Lehrer. Is the peace process, the withdrawal of the Serb troops and the other matters, proceeding on schedule today?

The President. So far it's proceeding in an orderly way. The Serb forces are withdrawing. They're withdrawing in a fashion that appears to our commanders to be consistent with their commitment to be gone in the 11-day time period. And General Jackson is readying our forces to deploy.

Mr. Lehrer. When will that happen, do you think? First, NATO troops—when will they go in now?

The President. I think it will be quite soon. It's his decision, and they are—I think there are a number of factors that are going into his thinking, but they'll have to be in there pretty soon because they're determined not to let some big vacuum develop. But they have a lot of plans to make, and they're mapping them, starting with a strategy for demining, and then dealing with the refugees that are brought back and those that want to come back on their own. And they're working that. But I would expect it would be quite soon.

Russian Troops

Mr. Lehrer. What's your reading of this Russian troop movement today that caused such a turmoil? The Russian troops came from Bosnia into Serbia, and there was some idea that they may go into Kosovo. What's going on?

The President. Well, the last we heard was, I think, when Mr. Ivanov told Secretary Albright that they were just pre-positioning, but that they recognized that we had to work out the arrangements for their participation. And even as we speak, there are discussions going on about that.

Mr. Lehrer. Do you foresee a major problem developing over this?

The President. I don't really think so, but there are some factors I would imagine they'll have to work through. And I haven't received a detailed briefing. But, for example, we're going

to have almost 30 countries this time in this operation, and I would expect that in each one of the zones of responsibility, the areas of responsibility, there will be multiple countries. The Russians, I think, would like to play a major role, but they understand we have to have unity of command under General Jackson. That's the *sine qua non* of the whole thing.

But we also know in every zone we have to have two things: First of all, there has to be the fact and the feeling of safety and security so the Kosovars will go home; secondly, in those sectors where there are Serbs, they have to know that we're committed to protecting them, too. And a lot of thought has been given to how that might best be done and how the Russians can make the strongest contribution there. So our commanders, their people, they're talking about it. They're talking it through, and I expect they'll resolve it.

NATO Airstrike Campaign

Mr. Lehrer. Mr. President, were you surprised that Milosevic hung in there as long as he did, for 78 days?

The President. Not after the beginning. When we started this, I thought there would be one of three possible scenarios. First of all, I absolutely reject the theory that some people have advanced that what he did was worse than he would have done if we hadn't bombed as early as we did. I just simply don't believe that. He had this plan laid out; he was going to carry it into effect last October. He didn't do it because of the threat of bombing.

So what I knew was that if he decided to behave as he had in Bosnia, that there would be a day or two of bombing, then we'd make this agreement that we made today, or a couple of days ago, and it would be over; but that there was a strong chance that it would not, because in the mind of Mr. Milosevic there was a big difference between Bosnia and Kosovo. Bosnia was something that he wanted badly that he didn't have. Kosovo was something that he had that he wanted to take absolute control of by running people out of.

So once he decided to take the bombing, I was not surprised that he took it for quite a long while, because he kept looking for ways

to break the unity of NATO. He kept looking for ways to turn someone against what we were doing.

Of course, the third scenario was that the bombing never worked and we had to take even more aggressive measures. But I always thought there was a much better than 50-50 chance that this bombing campaign would work. And I am gratified that it has achieved our objectives.

Mr. Lehrer. What was it, or who was it, that convinced you that bombing alone would work?

The President. Well, you know, when I talked to the American people about this in the beginning, I made it clear that there was no way that any bombing campaign could literally physically extract every Serbian soldier and paramilitary operative and put them back out of Kosovo. But I knew that our people had made dramatic progress in the last few years, even since Desert Storm, in precision-guided weapons and in the capacity of our planes to deliver them and to avoid even fairly sophisticated anti-aircraft operations. And I just felt that if we worked at it and we could hold the coalition together, that we'd be able to do enough damage that we could do it. And Secretary Cohen and General Shelton felt there was a better than 50-50 chance we could do it; Mr. Berger did.

Mr. Lehrer. Better than 50-50 was as good—

The President. Yes—Secretary Albright did. And I just—I've been dealing with Mr. Milosevic now a long time, you know, more than 6 years, and I think I have some understanding of the politics and the environment in Serbia. And I just felt if we kept pounding away that we could raise the price to a point where it would no longer make any sense for him to go on and where he could no longer maintain his position if he did.

And I regret that he required his people to go through what they have gone through, to lower their incomes as much as they've been lowered and to erode their quality of life as much as it's been eroded and even to have the civilian casualties which have been sustained, although they're far, far less than they were in Desert Storm after the bombing, for example. Still, I hate it. But what we did miraculously resulted in no combat air losses to our people—we did lose two fine Army airmen in training—and minimized the losses to their people, to their civilians. But it did a terrible amount of

damage. And finally, they couldn't go on; it didn't make any sense.

Mr. Lehrer. Mr. President, as I'm sure you're aware, the fact of no casualties by NATO has been used as a criticism of the whole approach here—that yes, ethnic cleansing was bad in Kosovo; yes, we needed to do something; but it wasn't worth risking any American lives to do so.

The President. Well, now, first of all, I never said that, that it wasn't worth risking any lives. We did risk lives, and I think the American people should know that. Our pilots, particularly the pilots in our A-10's, they were quite frequently fired upon by people holding these shoulder missiles, and they would deliberately position themselves in populated areas where there were civilians living. And over and over again, our pilots risked their lives by avoiding firing back, when they could easily have taken those people out who were firing at them. But to do so would have killed civilians. So there was risk to the lives. I remind you, we lost two airplanes and had to go in there and rescue two pilots. So that's not true.

Secondly, if we had put a ground force in for an invasion, it still wouldn't be done today. That is, all this bombing we did, we would have had to do anyway. Let me take you back to Operation Desert Storm, where we deployed a half-million people in the theater; took, as I remember, 4½ or 5 months to do it; bombed for 44 days there, but because of the terrain and the weather, they dropped more ordnance in 44 days than we did in our 79-day campaign.

So we would have had to do everything we have done to do this. I told the American people at the time that we could not have mounted and executed an invasion that would have stopped this ethnic cleansing, because at the time the Rambouillet talks broke down, when the Kosovars accepted it and the Serbs didn't, keep in mind, he already had 40,000 troops in and around Kosovo, and nearly 300 tanks. So no force—there was no way to mobilize and implant a force quick enough to turn it back.

And somehow the suggestion that our moral position would have been improved if only a few more Americans had died, I think is wrong. Believe me, fewer Serbs died than would die if we had had to invade. We would have had to deploy a force of about 200,000. We would have put them at great risk just getting them into the country. That was actually the biggest

risk. I don't think the combat, once in the country, was nearly as big a risk as the problems of deploying into Kosovo.

But I just don't accept that. I don't think that—we moved aggressively. We were criticized by some people in the Congress and elsewhere for starting the bombing too soon. And those who say that we should have used ground forces, even if we had announced on day one we were going to use ground forces, it would have taken as long as this bombing campaign went on to deploy them, probably longer.

Mr. Lehrer. What about just the threat of ground forces? You were criticized—you and your fellow NATO leaders were criticized for taking it off the table at the very beginning, telling Milosevic all he had to do was hunker down.

The President. I was afraid that I had done that when I said to the American people that I did not intend to use ground forces. And shortly thereafter in an interview, I made it clear that I did not do that. And then repeatedly I said that, and I said I thought we ought to be planning for ground forces.

So I think the differences, for example, between the British position and ours and others were somewhat overstated, because we had done quite a lot of planning for a ground force, and we had made it explicit that we weren't taking the option off the table. And Chancellor Schroeder from Germany was reported as having done so. When I talked to him and examined the German text of what he'd said, it was obvious that there had been a little bit of overstatement there.

So I don't think—I think that the NATO—my own view is if this had not worked, NATO would have put ground forces in there and that we were determined not to lose this thing, that we were determined to reverse the ethnic cleansing. I think the Europeans were especially sensitive, as I was, to the fact that it took 4 years to mobilize an action against Bosnia and that there were all kinds of arguments used about it, including the fact that U.N. peacekeepers were there, diplomacy was going on, any action would have upset all that, and they didn't want that to happen this time.

So the truth is that this action against ethnic cleansing was hugely more rapid and more responsive than what was done in Bosnia. And that's why there won't be nearly as many lost lives.

President's Moral Authority

Mr. Lehrer. On a more personal basis, Mr. President, some suggest when this operation began that the Lewinsky impeachment matter had weakened your moral authority to lead the country in a difficult situation like this. Were they wrong?

The President. Oh, I think so. I think the American people have been very good to me, and my family's been very good to me. And we went through a process which resulted in a decision by the public and by the Congress that I should serve. No one—no thinking American wants to have a President of either party and any philosophy who cannot fully serve and does not fully do his job or her job. And so I did what I was hired to do by the American people. And I believe, as strongly as I can say, it was the right thing to do. It was the moral thing to do. And our children will have a better world because we have now stood against ethnic cleansing, and not only that, in this case, we're going to be able to reverse it and let those people go home.

Congressional Support for Airstrikes

Mr. Lehrer. What is your analysis of why, for instance, the overwhelming majority of the Republicans in the House of Representatives did not vote to support this air war in the beginning?

The President. Oh, I don't know. I prefer to be grateful for those who did support it. And quite a number did. And we had very good support, a minority of Republicans in the Senate, but a substantial number supported us in a very vocal and effective way and were prepared to go even further to ground forces, as you know.

So I'm grateful for the support that we did have. A lot of very serious, thoughtful Republicans said they thought we were doing the right thing. Speaker Hastert voted with us, and I would remind you that we got a very good vote early on, with the help of the Speaker, for the deployment of American forces in a peace-keeping operation. And then they voted to support the troops and to fund the air war. So I'm grateful for that, and I leave it to others to interpret why they did what they did.

Criticism of President

Mr. Lehrer. Senator Hagel, Republican from Nebraska, who voted for——

The President. He did.

Mr. Lehrer. —when it was in the Senate, was asked why there were so many Republicans who were not supporting this, and he said it had to do with trust. And he said, quote, “This President has debased the one currency we each have in this business, and that’s trust, and he’ll never get it back,” end quote. That’s what—his explanation as to why Congress didn’t support you any more than they did.

The President. I think that’s pretty self-serving: “I’m not going to do what’s right for my country because I don’t like Bill Clinton.” You know, that’s—I think that’s pretty self-serving.

You know, I was gratified when, a few years ago, a historian of the Presidency said that I had kept a higher percentage of my commitments to the American people than any of the last five Presidents who preceded me—an academic man at the time I’d never even met. And so I think that that element of the party devoted the better part of 7, 8 years almost—now 7 years, more than 7 years—to attacking me personally because they knew the American people agree with my ideas and the direction in which I was taking the country. And on one occasion, much to my eternal regret, I gave them a little ammunition. But I have been trustworthy in my public obligations to the American people, and I have been trustworthy in my dealings with them.

I have—I don’t agree with them, and when I don’t, I tell them. But you know, we’ve gotten quite a lot done when they have put aside their personal frustration in not owning the White House. The truth is, those folks ought to lighten up. They believe they had—they say—a lot of my Republican friends, you know, they rail against the entitlement programs. They don’t like the entitlement programs. But the truth is, for a long time they thought the White House was an entitlement program. They never thought there would be another Democratic President in their lifetime. And they’re all gearing up again because they think they’re entitled to the parking spaces outside here and to the office space and all.

And this job here and this house, it doesn’t belong to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party. The American people own this place. And we’re all just here for a little while. And they ought to just relax and realize I’m a temporary tenant and that we’re all hired hands. And we ought to work for the American

people, do our best, have the elections, and then let the people make their decision and go on again.

I think—that’s what a lot of this is. They were—they’ve just been mad ever since I won because a lot of them really never believed there would be another Democrat in their lifetime. And attacking—if you can’t beat somebody on the ideas and the issues and the philosophy and the direction of the country and if the country is doing very well, so you just get madder and madder when the country does well, then all you have left is a personal attack and say, “Oh, I just don’t trust the guy.”

But that’s not good for America. And you know, I don’t attack them personally. I’m not going to get into it. My door is always open; my phone is always open; and I’m going to keep working with them in every way I can.

Mr. Lehrer. Since, just in the last 24 hours, since this thing has come to this critical concluding point, people who were criticizing this action, not just Republicans but pundits and people in the foreign policy establishment, they’re still criticizing you. They—does that surprise you?

The President. Gosh, no. I find that in Washington, in this sort of, what Professor Deborah Tannen has called this culture of critique, if I make a mistake, people want me to admit that I made a mistake. And I have tried to do that. I think it’s quite therapeutic. It’s hard to do, and I had to get hit upside the head to do it. But I did it, and it was good for me. But if they turn out to be wrong, they just change the subject or just keep insisting that it was, you know, just a fluke.

I think the most important thing is, were we right to take a stand in Kosovo against ethnic cleansing? Were we right to do it more quickly that we did in Bosnia? Should we set up—have a principle that guides us which says: Okay, in a world where people are fighting all the time over racial or ethnic or religious problems, we can’t tell everybody they’ve got to get along; we can’t stop every fight, like the fight between Eritrea and Ethiopia, or the struggles in Chechnya; but where we can, at an acceptable cost—that is, without risking nuclear war or some other terrible thing—we ought to prevent the slaughter of innocent civilians and the wholesale uprooting of them because of their race, their ethnic background, or the way they worship God?

I think that's an important principle, myself. I think it's a noble thing. I think the United States did a good thing. Now, they may argue that I did it—went about it in the wrong way. They may—I've answered that, I hope. At least I'm confident that I did the right thing in the right way. And that's what—historians can judge that based on the long-term consequences of this. But I believe what we did was a good and decent thing. And I believe that it will give courage to people throughout the world, and I think it will give pause to people who might do what Mr. Milosevic has done throughout the world.

I feel awful that we were not equipped and able and on the job to stop what happened in Rwanda. And since then, I have done everything I could to train this Africa Crisis Response team, military from different countries in Africa, so that if that starts again—God forbid—somewhere, they can move in and stop it.

I think the world—the freedom-loving nations of the world need to be organized to try to stop this sort of thing. I mean, don't you think it's interesting that we're on the verge of a new century, and you're going to have all these millennial celebrations, and we're all going to talk about how 100,000 websites get added to the Internet every day, and we're going to unlock the mysteries of the human gene, and what a modern, rapid world we're going to be living in, and here we are bogged down everywhere in the world by the oldest problems of human society: We fear people who are different from us; pretty soon we hate them; once we start hating them, we dehumanize them; then it's easy to kill them.

Now, it seems to me if we're going to reap the promise of the 21st century, if we don't want to go to Europe or some other place and have a bunch of Americans die in a bloody war, where we can nip this stuff in the bud we ought to do it. And that's what I've tried to do. And I think it was the right thing to do.

President's Accomplishments and Goals

Mr. Lehrer. As we sit here right now, Mr. President, is this the best moment of your Presidency?

The President. Oh, no, I wouldn't say that. I don't know—you know, there's so many things that have happened here at home that have been important to me, passing the economic

plan, passing the Brady bill and the assault weapons ban. So many things have happened internationally, the role that I was fortunate to be able to play in the peace process in the Middle East and in Ireland. But this could have the biggest long-term positive consequences if we do it right.

But frankly, I haven't—sometimes people say, "Well, do you feel vindicated?" The answer is no. I think America has been vindicated. I think what we stand for has been vindicated. But keep in mind, there have been lots of times in the past where people win a conflict and then squander the peace. So a lot of our work is still ahead of us. We've got to get those folks home. We've got to get those landmines up. We've got to work out these details on who's going to be involved in this peacekeeping mission. We then have to get this—we've got to organize police forces and a civil government for the Kosovars.

And then the really big thing over the long run—our European friends want to take the lead in this, but we ought to help them—we've got to get the World Bank and all these other people involved in a development plan for the Balkans that involves not just Kosovo but Macedonia, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, and, I hope some day, Serbia, if they have a government that respects freedom and democracy and human rights, so that these people have something pulling them together instead of these ancient ethnic troubles pulling them apart.

Now, if we get all that done, it might be perhaps the most satisfying thing because it might prove that people can lay down their hatreds of people who are different.

I basically think free people will figure out a way to make the most of their lives and work out their problems if they can get the rules of engagement right. That's why I gave somewhat of an extended answer to what you said about the Republicans, because I think—you know, differences are good. Nobody's got the whole truth. But you've got to get the rules of engagement right. And I think what we did in Kosovo was profoundly important.

Mr. Lehrer. Mr. President, thank you very much.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview began at approximately 6 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to Lt. Gen.

Mike Jackson, British Royal Army, Commander, Kosovo International Security Force; Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov of Russia; CW3 David A. Gibbs, USA, and CW2 Kevin L. Reichert, USA, Apache helicopter pilots killed in a training acci-

dent in Albania on May 5; Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of Germany; Deborah Tannen, professor, Georgetown University; and President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro).

Videotaped Address to the Kosovar Refugees *June 12, 1999*

To all the people of Kosovo, who have suffered so much in the face of Mr. Milosevic's savage campaign of ethnic cleansing, I'm happy to say that the time of return is near. The Serb forces who drove you from your homes are leaving Kosovo. All are required to leave. The NATO-led troops who will protect you are beginning to go in. Mr. Milosevic has failed utterly in his efforts to erase your history, your culture, your presence from your land. Soon, you will be going home.

Now we must make sure you can return safely. I know you're anxious to reunite with your loved ones, to find out what condition your homes are in, to reclaim your land. But before you do, we must be certain all the Serbian forces have left and see to it that international forces are in place throughout Kosovo. We must start clearing the landmines, some of which may be in your homes, in your community buildings, along roads and bridges. We need to make sure there's enough food, water, and shelter to meet your needs. And we most urgently need to reach the desperate people who have been trapped in the hills and forests of Kosovo.

Until all of you can return in safety, we will provide aid in Albania and Macedonia. And we will not forget the kindness of the nations that have given you shelter, or their own needs for assistance and stability.

As you prepare to go home, I know you have many reasons to be bitter and full of anger. But I ask you not to let Mr. Milosevic have

the victory of seeing your spirits broken and your hearts turn to stone. No one should do to the ethnic Serbs who live in Kosovo what their leaders did to you. Do not prove Mr. Milosevic right, that people of different ethnic and religious groups are inevitably enemies.

No human being should ever have to experience what you have been forced to endure. We will seek effective justice through law for the perpetrators of these crimes. But we must have an end to ethnic cleansing and the beginning of a Kosovo where every child can go to school, every family can practice its faith, every community can live a normal life in peace. That is what we fought for. That is what NATO peacekeepers will help build when they go in. That is the future we now have a chance to shape together.

I thank you for your courage and your endurance, and I look forward to seeing you go home.

NOTE: The address was videotaped at approximately 6:35 p.m. on June 11 in the Roosevelt Room at the White House for later broadcast on the U.S. Information Agency WORLDNET in the Balkan region. The transcript was embargoed for release until 2 a.m., e.d.t., on June 12. In his remarks, the President referred to President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro). A tape was not available for verification of the content of this address.