

weapons ban. We've got the lowest crime rate in 25 years. The American people are safer, and honest hunters and sportsmen haven't been hurt a bit. The American people understand that commonsense gun laws don't infringe our rights; they protect our lives. It's that simple.

This isn't a partisan issue anywhere else in America. It shouldn't be a partisan issue in Washington. Let us learn from the lessons of Littleton. Let us remember the children of Littleton and, indeed, honor the memory of all

the children who lost their lives to gun violence in our country. Let's build a stronger and safer America for our kids in the 21st century.

Thank for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at 11:43 p.m. on June 18 in the Senator Room at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Cologne, Germany, for broadcast at 10:06 a.m. e.d.t. on June 19. The transcript was embargoed for release until the broadcast.

Interview With Wolf Blitzer of Cable News Network's "Late Edition" in Cologne June 20, 1999

President Boris Yeltsin of Russia

Mr. Blitzer. Mr. President, thank you so much for joining us on this very special "Late Edition" from here in Cologne.

There have been reports that President Yeltsin has been ill, erratic, that his behavior has been shaky. You just met with him a little while ago. What's your impression?

The President. Well, his behavior was neither erratic nor shaky today. He was strong, clear, forceful, and looking to the future. We actually had quite a good meeting. We got a lot done. We set out an agenda to continue to work on reducing the nuclear threat; to continue to work on reducing the likelihood of any cooperation of Russian entities with Iran's missile technology development; with working to help Russia comply with the IMF and get its economy going strongly again; and obviously, we talked about our commitment to fully implement the agreements we made over Kosovo.

So, today all I can tell you is I had good personal experience. He was clear, concise, and direct and strong.

Russia-U.S. Nuclear Security Cooperation

Mr. Blitzer. But a lot of people were concerned when the Russians sent those 150 or 200 soldiers into Pristina so secretly. With the Russians still having thousands of nuclear warheads, should Americans be concerned about the security, the safety of that nuclear arsenal if there's a problem between civilian and military control of the Russian military?

The President. Well, so far, I can only tell you what our experience is, now in its 6½ years. We've worked very well with the Russian military to implement the system that was set up actually before I became President, although we've tried to strengthen it, to strengthen the Russian security over nuclear weapons, to strengthen security over other materials. President Yeltsin and I agreed last year to destroy 50 tons of plutonium arising out of nuclear operations. We have great confidence in that, and it's working quite well. I have no reason to believe that it won't continue to do so.

Russian Role in Kosovo

Mr. Blitzer. But will you concede, though, that the dash for the airport in Pristina and the grabbing hold of that piece of territory helped them get a better deal for their peacekeepers in Kosovo than would have been the case if they had not done so?

The President. I'm not sure that's right, for the following reason: I felt it was important myself—and I told all of our people this, and several of our NATO Allies—that Russia have a different role in Kosovo, because of the importance of making clear our common commitment to protect civilians, both the Kosovar Albanians who are coming home and the Serbs who remain. Therefore, I thought it was important for Russia to have its forces in more than one of these sectors. And of course, as you know now, they'll be working with us and with the Germans and the French.

So they may believe that; the Russians may believe that. But in my own mind, I had already determined that if our Allies would go along, they should be in more than one sector.

Mr. Blitzer. But not necessarily in control of the airport, which originally was going to be the strategic headquarters for the peacekeepers.

The President. Yes, but now the division of labor they have worked out at the airport is quite acceptable to us and guarantees that the mission can go forward. So I think that's the most important thing.

We have to—every decision we made, including the agreements made with the Russians, had one thing uppermost in their minds: Will the mission succeed? That is, today it's a very happy day. The Serbian forces will go out on schedule, the last of them. We have about 20,000 of our NATO peacekeepers in there; 62,000 of the Kosovars have already come home, some of them before we wanted them to, because of the demining operations. So I feel very good about where we're going with this now, and I'm leaving here with real confidence that we are going to succeed in achieving all of our objectives.

Safety of U.S. Troops

Mr. Blitzer. But you have to be concerned about the potential for the KLA, the Kosovo Liberation Army—the revenge, the hatred, the fact that they're not going to be satisfied with autonomy, they're going to want full independence from Serbia—the potential for danger to those U.S. troops is very, very real.

The President. There is a potential for danger for all troops, from both disgruntled Kosovar Albanians or disgruntled or frightened Serbs in Kosovo. But I am encouraged that the leaders of the KLA have now signed on to the commitment to demilitarize. They've agreed to put away their uniforms; to give up their big weapons, their non-pistol weapons; to do everything we have asked them to do.

Might there be individuals or small groups who are full of anger and seek revenge? Of course, and we'll have to be very vigilant, just as we've had to be vigilant in Bosnia.

I also think we're going to have to work hard, to take initiative, to try to take some of that venom out of the atmosphere. When Elie Wiesel, our Nobel laureate who survived the Holocaust, came back from the tour I asked him to take of the camps, he talked about how

troubled he was by the children, the families, how much we needed to work on that, and how hard we'd have to work to get people—religious leaders and others in there to try to get people to turn away from revenge.

But this is a problem everywhere where such things occur. And you'd look at these hideous accounts that are just now coming out, even worse than we imagined, about the mass killings and the graves and the unusual, almost unimaginable cruelty. So it will take them some time to get through that, and we're going to work with them.

Mr. Blitzer. You know, some in the U.S. military, though, are concerned that just as—when the U.S., when President Reagan sent troops into Lebanon, there were high expectations. When you sent troops into Somalia, there were high expectations. Things could go sour quickly. Is that realistic, or are you taking certain steps that will prevent another Lebanon or Somalia?

The President. Well, I think we learned a lot about that. And when we went to Bosnia, where all the same things were present—remember, we'd had a quarter of a million people killed; we'd had 2.5 million refugees; we had all those horrible internment camps—all the hideous, awful stories we're hearing now out of Kosovo, we had in Bosnia for a longer period of time.

So we did a lot of extra work on security, and we were quite careful about how we defined our mission and how we carried it out, based on lessons learned both in Lebanon and in Somalia.

And so we'll try to carry those lessons through. I can't tell the American people there will not be any violent incident, that no American will ever be harmed or killed. But I can say that we have learned the lessons of the last several years, and I think what we are doing is profoundly important.

Aftermath of Situation in the Balkans

Mr. Blitzer. In your Oval Office address, you declared victory. Some of your critics, though, say that as long as President Slobodan Milosevic is in power, there is no victory.

The President. Well, that's two different things. Let me first say that when I spoke to the American people, I said we had three objectives: to reverse the ethnic cleansing and bring the Kosovar Albanians home—we're doing that, 62,000 are already back; to do it in a way that

would keep our Alliance together—we're stronger than we ever were; and that I would seek a partnership with Russia as we had in Bosnia. We have now formalized that partnership, so that even though our relationships with Russia were quite strained during this period of the conflict, I think that we're actually in a position to have a stronger relationship with Russia in the future than we had before the conflict started. And so I feel good about that. So that is victory.

Now, do I think the Serbian people would be better off without Mr. Milosevic? You bet I do. He has been indicted by the War Crimes Tribunal, and every day now we see the vivid pictures which graphically demonstrate that it was even worse than we imagined. There is no statute of limitations on that. The Serbian—the leader of the Serbian church has now called for him to step aside. And I certainly hope that will happen, and we have time to focus on that. But first, we've got to do the mission. We've got to bring the folks home in safety and self-government.

Mr. Blitzer. Well, what the critics also say is that the U.S. and the NATO Allies have done nothing to go after other leading indicted war criminals, Serbs Ratko Mladic, Radovan Karadzic, Arkan. Why should President Milosevic be any more concerned than they are? They're all still free men.

The President. Well, in our sector in Bosnia, we have arrested people who were indicted, and so have the British, and we have worked with them. And I think that would be a big mistake for Mr. Milosevic now. We may not have an extradition agreement with Serbia. But he—as long as he remains at large, there is no statute of limitations. And if I were in his position, I wouldn't take too much comfort from that. But the best thing that can happen for the Serbian people is if he were no longer President.

Mr. Blitzer. And you think that's realistic, that that could happen anytime soon?

The President. Well, I think that I shouldn't comment on that right now. But I think that there's—with the church leaders calling for him to step down, with the people in the opposition in Serbia calling for him to do so, and with the commitment we have made as allies to support humanitarian aid to the Serbs but no reconstruction aid as long as he's there, I think that's a pretty clear message.

Mr. Blitzer. You know about the reports that you've signed an intelligence finding to actively seek to undermine his regime?

The President. I don't comment on those things. I can't—

Expectations of Operation Allied Force

Mr. Blitzer. I knew you wouldn't, but I figured I would ask anyhow.

Let's move on to talk about—under the category of “now the truth can be told.” When you gave the order to launch the airstrikes, did you ever believe in your wildest imagination it would take 78 days, and all the devastation that it did take, to finally declare a victory?

The President. I'll tell you what I thought. I thought that there was maybe a 50 percent chance it would be over in a week, because once he knew we would do it, I thought he would remember Bosnia, and I thought he would understand what we could do. But I knew that if he decided to take the punishment of the air campaign, it could go on quite a long while, because he would be trying all along to divide the allies or to bring pressure from the outside to try to find some way to bring it to a close.

And so I told everybody when we started, I said, “Look, if we start this and it doesn't work out in 2 or 3 days, we've got to be prepared to go on.”

I knew that we had, because of the facts of this case, the capacity—with the sophisticated weaponry and the skill of our pilots—I knew we had the capacity to essentially take down the military apparatus and the economic apparatus supporting it. But I knew it could take quite a long time. I didn't have any specific deadline, but I knew it could take quite a long time.

Response to Genocide and Minority Oppression

Mr. Blitzer. Mr. President, some of your aides are now talking about a Clinton doctrine in foreign policy in the aftermath of this war against Yugoslavia. Is there, in your mind, a Clinton doctrine?

The President. Well, I think there's an important principle here that I hope will be now upheld in the future and not just by the United States, not just by NATO but also by the leading countries of the world, through the United Nations. And that is that while there may well be a great deal of ethnic and religious conflict

in the world—some of it might break out into wars—that whether within or beyond the borders of a country, if the world community has the power to stop it, we ought to stop genocide and ethnic cleansing. People ought—innocent civilians ought not to be subject to slaughter because of their religious or ethnic or racial or tribal heritage.

That is what we did, but took too long in doing, in Bosnia. That is what we did and are doing in Kosovo. That is, frankly, what we failed to do in Rwanda, where so many died so quickly, and what I hope very much we'll be able to do in Africa if it ever happens there again.

Gun Control Legislation

Mr. Blitzer. All right. Let's move on to some domestic issues. Guns—a big subject this past week. Do you really believe it's realistic, it's appropriate to register all guns in the United States? And if that were done, would that stop the violence?

The President. Well, you asked two questions. Realistic? In this Congress, perhaps not. Appropriate? Sure. We register cars. And if we did register them, it would be easier to track sales and easier to do comprehensive background checks.

But that's not what I asked the Congress to do. All I asked the Congress to do was to close the loophole for sales at gun shows and flea markets, so we could do the same background checks we now do at gun stores. And do I think that would make America a less violent place? Yes, I think there would be less crime with guns if that happened.

We already—under the Brady bill, we've stopped 400,000 improper sales. And we also have a 25-year low in our crime rate and violent crime coming down, on average, even slightly more than that. So do I think violent crime would go down more? Absolutely, I do.

Mr. Blitzer. And the registration, you're going to hold off on, for the time being?

The President. Yes. I mean, if we can't close the gun show loophole, we're certainly not going to pass that.

But let me ask you this—and that doesn't have anything to do with the right to keep and bear arms. We have—there's a constitutional right to travel in America, enshrined by the Supreme Court as a constitutional right. No one believes that registering our cars or proving that we know how to drive them undermines our

constitutional right to travel. It facilitates our constitutional right to travel by making sure we're safe on the road and that we know what we're doing.

Mr. Blitzer. All right, but you will concede, though, that the Democrats have a potential political bonanza from this defeat of the legislation this past week, going into the elections next year.

The President. Well, if the public supports this. But I didn't want a political bonanza. I wanted a safer America. And our party did not seek political points on this. We sought—if we wanted a political bonanza, we would have gone in with a bunch of issues that we knew were popular that we had no chance to pass. We thought—we went in there with an agenda that we thought we could pass, that we knew would make America a safer place.

No one questions—no one seriously questions, after the experience of the last 5 years with the Brady bill, that if we close the gun show and flea market loophole, that there will be fewer improper sales and it will make America safer at minimum disruption to the people who buy and sell guns and use them lawfully. So that's—what we've tried to do is to get things done that would make America a safer place.

2000 Presidential Election

Mr. Blitzer. All right. Speaking about politics, let's talk about Presidential politics. Do you think that Texas Governor George W. Bush is qualified to be President of the United States?

The President. Well, that's a decision the American people have to make.

Mr. Blitzer. Well, what do you think?

The President. Well, I think—you know, for one thing, we've got to see where he stands on the issues. So far, we know almost nothing of that, except what we know from his record as Governor. He said—his announcement speech was very well crafted and was strikingly reminiscent of what those of us who call ourselves New Democrats have been saying since 1991.

But on the specifics, I just don't know. I mean, for example, he said nothing about this gun battle going on in the House. He signed the concealed weapons bill in the Texas Legislature. That's just the one example.

The one thing I thought the Vice President did particularly well when he announced was to say, "I'm very proud of what we've done

in the last 6½ years. I've got all the relevant experience to be President. But the important thing is, what are we going to do in the next 4 years? And here are specific things I will do." I think that Governor Bush owes it to the American people to say the same thing.

Mr. Blitzer. Well, why is Vice President Gore so far behind Governor Bush in the polls, and what does the Vice President have to do to catch up?

The President. Well, I think in historical terms, he's not particularly far behind. I think if you go back and look at this point in 1959, when candidate Richard Nixon, Vice President Richard Nixon, was going to run as the Republican nominee, he was considerably further behind Adlai Stevenson, who was the best-known Democrat at the time.

I think the American people—the encouraging thing to me is that two-thirds of them have said they want to know more about all the candidates, including the Vice President. And I believe when they look at experience, proven success, and the program for the future—most—all elections are about tomorrow—I think he's going to do very well.

Mr. Blitzer. Do you think that he was trying, this week, to distance himself from you, the Vice President, by saying, almost volunteering, that your behavior last year was inexcusable?

The President. Well, I took no offense at it. He didn't say anything that I hadn't said in much starker terms a long time ago. So there was nothing inappropriate about that.

I thought the most important thing he did, frankly, by far, was to say, "I've got experience in areas that matter, and we have succeeded; here's what I'm going to do, specifically, if you elect me; and the real choice is whether you want to build on this record of success and go beyond it, or you want to go back."

I think—keep in mind, the American people will view this election, as they should—as they should—as about them, their children, and their future. All elections are about tomorrow. So if you've been a good Vice President or a good Governor of Texas, for the voters at election time, that's only valuable if it's evidence that you'll do good tomorrow.

They hire you; they give you a check every 2 weeks to do a good job. So I thought the most important thing he did was to talk about his future vision.

Hillary Clinton's Possible Senate Candidacy

Mr. Blitzer. All right, let's talk about the First Lady's potential run for the Senate from New York. When did you discover, when did you learn that the First Lady was a New York Yankees fan?

The President. Oh, when I first—shortly after I met her, because I'm a big baseball fan. I mean, I'm—

Mr. Blitzer. You know, a lot of people think she just came up—

The President. I know that. But she said how it came to be. Her primary allegiance all her life has been to the Chicago Cubs. If you go to Chicago, basically, most of the people on the north side are for the Cubs; most of the people on the south side are for the White Sox. And she said, but I also—I remember back in the seventies, we were talking about other baseball, and she said, "But I like the Yankees, too." I said, "Well, why don't you like the White Sox?" She said, "If you're from Chicago, you're for the White Sox or the Cubs, and normally not both." So our family always liked the Yankees.

Mr. Blitzer. All right. You know, there—

The President. I learned it a long time ago.

Mr. Blitzer. —you know, there are reports out today in U.S. News and World Report that she's thinking of moving out of the White House and getting a place in New York in the fall.

The President. Well, it's not true that she's going to move out of the White House. But let me answer the report. Months ago, we said that we intended to get a place in New York. We talked—we started talking not long after we moved to the White House about where we would live when we got out. She's always wanted to live in New York, so we said we'd do that. And I would divide my time between New York and going home to Arkansas and finishing my library and doing my work there.

Now, if she runs for the Senate, she'll obviously have to spend a lot more time there. But it will be more like an incumbent Member of Congress running for reelection. That is, she's not going to stop being First Lady and doing her other responsibilities, but she'll have to spend a lot more time in New York, and we'll have to get a place there for her to be while she's spending her time there.

Mr. Blitzer. If she runs for the Senate, will you be eligible to vote for her in New York

State? In other words, would you move your voting registration from Arkansas to New York?

The President. Well, I might, because I think every vote counts, and I'd certainly want her to win if she ran.

Mr. Blitzer. Could be that close?

The President. I will say this. I think if this is what she wants to do, if she wants, if she decides to do this, I will be enthusiastically supportive, because I think she would be truly magnificent. I think she'd be great for the people of New York and good for the people of America.

In all the years I've been in public life, of all the people I've ever known, she has been the most consistently, seriously dedicated to the kinds of public issues that I think are important today: to the welfare of children, the strength of families, the future of education, quality of health care. I mean, this is something—if the people of New York chose her, they would have somebody with 30 years of unbroken, consistent, committed dedication, who knows a lot and is great with working with people. So if that's what she wants, I'm strong for it.

Mr. Blitzer. And so you're ready to move from—

The President. I'm ready to do whatever she wants. I will be—whatever the facts are about her running for the Senate, I'll be dividing my time between New York and home, because I've got a library to build; I've got a public policy center to set up; and it's a real gift I want to give my native State, and I want it to be something wonderful and good. So, I've spent quite a lot of time on it already.

Post-Presidency Plans

Mr. Blitzer. Mr. President, you've always been someone who's looked ahead. When you look ahead to your personal life after you leave the White House, what do you see?

The President. Well, it depends in part on what Hillary does. You know, I'll probably be going to meetings of the Senate spouses club, if she decides to run. But I want to continue to be active in areas that I care a great deal about. And I think that through my library and through the public policy center and perhaps through some other activities, I can continue to work on some of the issues of world peace and reconciliation of people across these racial and religious lines that I've devoted so much of my life to. I can continue the work at home

on issues that I care a great deal about, including involving young people in public service, whether it's young people in AmeriCorps or young Americans who are interested in running for public office. I've given a lot of thought to it.

But I'll find something useful to do. I want to work hard. I'm too early—it's too early to quit work, and I'm not good enough to go on the senior golf tour. So I expect I'll have to just keep on doing what I'm doing.

Mr. Blitzer. So what—I'm hearing more of the Jimmy Carter model as opposed to a Gerald Ford model?

The President. Yes, that may just be a function of age and circumstance. I think President Carter has been the most effective former President in my lifetime and one of the three or four most important former Presidents, in his public service and the quality of his work, in the entire history of the United States. So what I would do wouldn't be exactly what he has done, but I think the model of what he has done and how he's done it is a good model for every former President who gets out who still has good health and a few years left.

Mr. Blitzer. Okay, Mr. President. I'm told we're all out of time. I want to thank you very much for joining us for this special "Late Edition" here in Cologne.

The President. This is your last trip with me, so I want to thank you for 6½ good years. Good luck.

Mr. Blitzer. Thank you very much. It's been an honor to cover you.

NOTE: The interview was videotaped at 4:27 p.m. in the Bibliotek Room at the Hyatt Regency Hotel for later broadcast on Cable News Network. In his remarks, the President referred to President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro); Serbian Patriarch Pavle, president of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church; and suspected war criminals Radovan Karadzic, Ratko Mladic, and Zeljko (Arkan) Raznatovic, indicted by the International War Crimes Tribunal. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.