

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:25 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Exchange With Reporters Prior to Discussions With Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom at Camp David, Maryland
February 23, 2001

Q. How is it going so far?

President Bush. Pretty darn good.

Q. How was lunch? Is it true that Churchill once came to this cabin?

President Bush. That's exactly right.

Q. How goes the get-acquainted session?

President Bush. Good, John [John Roberts, CBS News], thank you. "Ambassador" Johndroe was telling us where to go.

Q. Sir, can you tell us the historical significance of where you're standing?

President Bush. This is where Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the first visitor to Camp David, stayed. It's a huge honor for Laura and me to welcome the current Prime Minister and his wife. And we're about to have a press availability to answer all these difficult questions that you're throwing at us, John. I promised the Prime Minister that you in particular would be-

have well during the press conference—and Fournier [Ron Fournier, Associated Press].

All right, we're actually now going to go for a walk of a couple miles.

Q. Mr. Prime Minister, where's your coat?

Prime Minister Blair. It's around somewhere, but actually it's a lot warmer than Canada.

President Bush. You shouldn't have noticed that.

NOTE: The exchange began at 3:23 p.m. on the porch of Holly Lodge. In his remarks, the President referred to Assistant Press Secretary Gordon Johndroe and Prime Minister Blair's wife, Cherie. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.

The President's News Conference With Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom at Camp David
February 23, 2001

President Bush. Welcome. It's my honor to welcome the Prime Minister, from our strongest friend and closest ally, to Camp David. We've had a couple of formal visits. More importantly, we had a nice walk around Camp David and got to know each other. And as they told me, he's a pretty charming guy. He put the charm offensive on me. [*Laughter*] And it worked. No, we're delighted, and tonight we'll have a

dinner, just the four of us—Mrs. Blair and Laura and the two of us—and I'm really looking forward to it.

This is a chance for me to tell the Prime Minister how dedicated my administration will be to an alliance that has made a huge difference in the world, an alliance that I firmly believe will make a difference in the years to come.

We discussed trade. We discussed defenses. We discussed the Prime Minister's vision of a strong NATO. We discussed a lot of subjects. The thing I want to leave people with the impression of is that ours will be a strong and good personal relationship and a alliance that will stand the test of time.

Mr. Prime Minister, welcome.

Prime Minister Blair. Thank you very much, Mr. President. Well, I was delighted to come here, and I've been really enthusiastic about our meetings so far. They've been absolutely excellent, very productive, as I hoped and expected. We discussed a whole range of issues. I think we've been through all the issues that you would expect, plus some more. And I've found it a very, very useful meeting, indeed.

And I just want to make one point by way of introduction, which is that our countries have stood together in some very difficult times, very hard times, some of the most testing times the world has ever known. And the reason we've come through those times together and stronger is because we share the same values; we share the same interests; we have a lot of common history; but I think, most of all, we have the same perception of the world and the belief in freedom and the belief in standing up for what is right and just. And everything that I've heard today confirms for me, in my view, that that relationship will carry on and strengthen in the years to come.

I thank you very much, indeed.

President Bush. Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister.

Fournier [Ron Fournier, Associated Press].

National Missile Defense

Q. Mr. President, have you received a commitment from the Prime Minister to support your missile defense plan, including building missile defense sites in Britain?

And Mr. Prime Minister, do you think that there is a threat that requires a missile

defense shield, and would you allow missile defense sites to be built on your—in your country?

President Bush. Mr. Prime Minister, before we answer that, generally when I ask for one question, we only get one question coming. Well done. [Laughter]

We had a long discussion about missile defense. I will, obviously, let the Prime Minister speak for himself. I made the case, like I will do to all the leaders with whom I meet, that we need to think differently about the post-cold-war era, that there are new threats that face people who love freedom.

There is the threat of an accidental launch of a missile. There are the threats of potential blackmail when one of these nations develops weapons of mass destruction and be willing to point at America, Britain, our allies, our friends, people with whom we've got commitments. And we've got to deal with those in a realistic way. And the Prime Minister asked a lot of really good questions, and he can answer what you asked, Ron.

But we're in the process of coming up with a realistic way to deal with the true threats. It makes a lot of sense to explore options. It makes a lot of sense to develop defenses to face the true threats. It also makes sense for us to send the message to the world that in the post-cold-war era, the United States will handle its responsibilities to keep the peace in a constructive way, by reducing our offensive weapons, as well. And I'm now talking to the Pentagon to come up with a level of nuclear weaponry that will help us keep the peace. As to whether or not there will be sites or no sites, that's too early to determine, because I have yet to propose to the Prime Minister what will work.

Prime Minister Blair. First of all, let me say, I understand and share the concerns of the President and the American administration about weapons of mass destruction and nuclear proliferation. And I think it's

very important in that context that we discuss all the ways that we can deal with this threat, which is a real threat and a present threat, both in relation to offensive and defensive systems.

And I said to the President, and I want to repeat to you, that I welcome very much the approach that the administration has taken, which is to be very open about this, which is to talk to people about it, to make sure that allies are consulted properly. These are very, very big and important issues. But we welcome the dialog that there has been on it. And I think if you look at the world today and you see those countries that are developing weapons of mass destruction, I think it is a debate that it is right to have.

Q. Can I ask you both about missile defense? Mr. President, can I ask you, if you fail to get agreement among your key allies, including Britain, are you prepared then to go ahead alone with some form of missile defense system? And if I can ask the Prime Minister, are you prepared to say in principle now you could back an American missile defense system?

President Bush. I don't think I'm going to fail to persuade people. I think it makes—it's commonsensical to say to our friends, let's come together, work together, to develop a defense against the true threats of the 21st century. And so, I don't accept your hypothesis.

Prime Minister Blair. Well, I'm sure, for my part, that this is a debate that is important to have, for the very reasons that the President gave earlier. And I think if you look at the weapons of mass destruction that people are trying to develop in nuclear proliferation, that it's important that we look at every single way we possibly can of dealing with this threat.

Now, as the President said a moment or two ago, we don't have a specific proposal on the table yet. But I understand and share the American concerns, as I've said many times before. And I think what is important is that if we take this forward

in a constructive way and have the right discussion with allies, then we can find a way through this. I've always believed that, incidentally, and I believe that even more firmly having talked to the President today.

President Bush. I'll give you a followup answer.

I thought it interesting that Mr. Putin talked about missile defenses. I know there are some concerns in Europe about Russian reaction to the development of defenses that will make the world more peaceful. And Mr. Putin has started talking about the need for folks to develop—think about developing systems that will intercept missiles on launch, for example, theater-based systems that will keep the peace. We found that to be a breakthrough of sorts, a recognition that the cold war has passed, that we are not Russia's enemy—I don't view Russia as our enemy, either—and that there will be new threats that we have to deal with. If we are peaceful, loving people, we must use our technologies to appropriately deal with the threats that we'll be facing. And I thought that was a positive breakthrough.

Steve Holland [Reuters].

Situation in Iraq

Q. Yes, sir. Could both of you explain how you keep the Iraqi sanctions from crumbling, and how do you explain how the Iraqi sanctions could be reconstituted to keep them from—to help ease the strain on the Iraqi people?

President Bush. We spent a lot of time talking about our mutual interests in Iraq and the Persian Gulf, and from our perspective, as you know, I made the famous statement that our sanctions are like Swiss cheese. That means they're not very effective, and we're going to work together to figure out a way to make them more effective.

But I think the Prime Minister and I both recognize that it is going to be important for us to build a consensus in the

region to make the sanctions more effective. Colin Powell left today, after lunch, to move around the Middle East, collect thoughts and to listen, with a policy of strengthening our mission to make it clear to Saddam Hussein that he shall not terrorize his neighbors and not develop weapons of mass destruction.

Prime Minister Blair. Yes, if I can just add to that, I think that—I mean, of course, we’ve looked the whole time to see how we can make sanctions more effective. But don’t be under any doubt at all of our absolute determination to make sure that the threat of Saddam Hussein is contained and that he is not able to develop these weapons of mass destruction that he wishes to do.

And as I constantly point out to people, I mean, this is a man with a record on these issues, both in respect to the murder of thousands of his own people, in respect to the war against Iran, in respect to the annexation of Kuwait. And we know perfectly well, given the chance, he will develop these weapons of mass destruction. Indeed, he’s trying to do so and will get as much technology as he can to do so.

Now, of course, we’ve got to—we’re all conscious of the fact that our quarrel is not with the Iraqi people, who in many ways suffer under the yoke of Saddam Hussein. But—and therefore, it’s important that we make sure that the sanctions hit him, Saddam, as effectively as they possibly can. But we need to contain that threat, and that’s why the action that we took is right and justified.

President Bush. BBC guy [Stephen Sackur, BBC], as promised.

European Rapid-Reaction Force

Q. Thank you, Mr. President. If I can pick up on what we were discussing yesterday, now that you’ve had a chance to talk to the Prime Minister, do you share the concerns of many in your party that the European plan for a rapid-reaction military force could seriously undermine NATO?

And I’d like to hear first your response and then the Prime Minister’s.

President Bush. The Prime Minister and I spent a lot of time on this subject, as well, and I support his point of view. He assured me that NATO is going to be the primary way to keep the peace in Europe and that the United States—and I assured him the United States will be actively engaged in NATO, remain engaged in Europe with our Allies.

But he also assured me that the European defense would no way undermine NATO. He also assured me that there would be a joint command, that planning would take place within NATO, and that should all NATO not wish to go on a mission, that would then serve as a catalyst for the defense forces moving on their own.

And finally, I was very hopeful when we discussed the Prime Minister’s vision, that such a vision would encourage our NATO allies and friends to bolster their defense budgets, perhaps. And so I support what the Prime Minister has laid out. I think it makes a lot of sense for our country.

Prime Minister Blair. Well, I was very grateful for what the President had to say on that issue. And the important thing to remember is that, as the President has just outlined to you, this is in circumstances where NATO as a whole chooses not to be engaged. It is limited to the peace-keeping and humanitarian tasks that are set out. It is not a standing army. It is a capability that Europe should have, but the sovereign decision of each nation is necessary for each operation.

And speaking together as the founders of NATO, we would never do anything to undermine NATO. But where NATO as a whole chooses not to be engaged, it is important that we have the capability, where it’s right and within these limited tasks that I’ve set out, to be able to act, should we choose to do so ourselves.

And I think, done in that way, it is something that can strengthen NATO, give us

an additional string to our bow in circumstances where NATO doesn't want to be involved. And I think the President is absolutely right in a sense to put it up to us in Europe and say, "Well, if we are going to do this, then let us make sure that our capabilities match our aspirations." And I think done in that way it is good not just for Europe, but it's good for NATO and the U.S., as well. And I think that the discussion we had on it was very useful and very constructive.

Bush-Blair Relationship

Q. How much an obstacle is it to this special relationship you say you want to have on behalf of your two countries that you are ideologically poles apart? A tax cutter versus a tax raiser; a pro-death-penalty versus an anti-death-penalty; America first versus an interventionist—[inaudible]—

President Bush. [Inaudible]—you shouldn't be slandering in that way. [Laughter] He can handle his politics in Britain, and I'll handle mine in America. But we've got a lot of common interests. We agree on trade. We agree on ways to keep the peace. But most important, both of us recognize that this is a special relationship, the relationship between America and Britain, and we're going to keep it that way.

It is—the Prime Minister referred to the great history of the relationship between our two countries, and this is a fantastic legacy for both of us to inherit. And it's a legacy I take seriously, and it's a legacy that I will work hard to protect. I can assure you that when either of us get in a bind, there will be a friend on the other end of the phone.

Prime Minister Blair. Well, I endorse that completely. And I think it's important to recognize, as well—I mean, you know from the work that we do in Europe, as well, there are very strong alliances that can be formed with people across so-called ideological divides of that type. But I think what is important is that what we have

in common, our two countries and our interests, are so much more important for us in the work that we do.

And I should say also that I don't think if you look at the problems that are on the President's agenda, even his domestic agenda now in terms of the economy, in terms of some of the things—we actually had a brief conversation about education policy when we were on our walk together—I think there are some interesting things happening that—there's a good dialog on some of these things, too. So I'm sorry to disappoint you.

President Bush. John [John King, Cable News Network].

China and Iraq

Q. Mr. President, you spoke yesterday about sending a message to China if it is proven that the Chinese Government was helping the Iraqis at those missile sites—the air defense sites, excuse me. Mr. Prime Minister, I'm interested in what British intelligence tells you about any Chinese involvement, and if Chinese involvement is proven, what specific steps are each of you prepared to take, beyond just publicly voicing your displeasure?

President Bush. If I can answer that first, because we had a little bit of news today that the Chinese responded to our inquiry. And you're going to have to ask Condi Rice what specifically they said, but if I could paraphrase, it was: If this is the case, we'll remedy the situation. But we did get a response. As I told you yesterday, that we filed a complaint, and they responded this morning.

Q. Do you trust that they will keep their word in that regard?

President Bush. I think you've always got to begin with trust until proven otherwise.

Mr. Prime Minister, you may want to—

Prime Minister Blair. I've got nothing to add to that, actually. I think that's the sensible approach, and it's the one we took, too.

President Clinton's Pardons

Q. Prime Minister, having stood squarely behind President Clinton for the last 4 years, through thick and thin, do you feel any embarrassment today on his behalf, as his Presidency clearly ended in scandal and sleaze?

Prime Minister Blair. You know, Trevor, as I've said over the last few days when I've been asked about this, Bill Clinton is a friend of mine and will remain a friend of mine. But I am not getting into what has been in the newspapers and media over here. I don't think it's appropriate for me; I don't think it's right.

President Bush. Campbell [Campbell Brown, NBC News].

Northern Ireland Peace Process

Q. Mr. President, your administration has yet to become actively engaged in the peacemaking process, particularly in Northern Ireland. Are you planning to become more engaged?

And Mr. Prime Minister, based on what you've observed so far, do you expect that President Bush will be as engaged as President Clinton?

President Bush. Well, we talked about the peace process. And I, like I did in the campaign, want to again praise President Clinton for his involvement. I asked the Prime Minister, "Did the President have a positive effect?" He said, "Absolutely." I then asked for him to let me know if I could ever help.

As you know, our position on any peace process is, it takes willing parties to come together, and if there is a way that I can help, I'd be more than willing to do so. I'm going to wait to be asked by the Prime Minister. He's got a better handle on it than I conceivably could, as to when and if the prestige of the United States is needed to make the process work better.

But we spent a lot of time discussing the issue. The Prime Minister deserves a lot of credit, as well, for working hard to bring a peace to Northern Ireland. And

progress is being made, and we will—I will be standing by, anxious to help, if I'm needed.

Prime Minister Blair. Well, I was very grateful for that offer by the President. And it's difficult to perceive the exact circumstances in which I might pick up the phone and ask the President to help. But the fact that I know he is there and willing to do that is very important, because President Clinton was a great assistance during difficult parts of the Northern Ireland peace process.

And it's a very difficult process. I mean, it goes on the whole time, and we make progress, day by day, week by week, month by month, and there are still some very, very tricky issues to sort out. So I can't exactly foresee the circumstances in which the American President can come in and be of help, but I was very grateful for the offer of that. And I think people in Northern Ireland will be, as well, because whatever the difficulties of the process there, my goodness, Northern Ireland is a different place today from what it was a few years back. And for people to know that there is that interest in the outside world, for people in Northern Ireland to know that, it gives them tremendous heart and hope.

Yes.

Bush-Blair Relationship

Q. A question for both of you. There has been a lot said about how different you are as people. Have you already in your talks found something maybe that you—some personal interest that you have in common, maybe in religion or sport or music?

President Bush. Well, we both use Colgate toothpaste. [Laughter]

Prime Minister Blair. They're going to wonder how you know that, George. [Laughter]

Q. I also wanted to ask you—you come up with a lot of nicknames for people. I

wondered if you already had one for the Prime Minister.

Prime Minister Blair. Well, I'm getting even embarrassed about all the ones I choose in this press conference. [Laughter]

President Bush. I'm still open for suggestions.

Well, we like sports. The Prime Minister informed me this morning that he exercised at the gym prior to meeting Vice President Cheney. I informed him after this press conference, I'm going to go exercise in the gym. We've both got great wives. I think probably the place we're going to find a lot of common ground is we're both dads, and proudly so, and recognize that as our most important responsibility—is to be loving dads.

I don't know if you found any common ground or not. [Laughter]

Prime Minister Blair. I think that's enough to be going on with.

President Bush. Jim [Jim Angle, Fox News].

Sanctions Against Iraq

Q. Mr. President, you talked about Secretary of State Powell going to the Middle East looking for consensus on how to handle Saddam Hussein. We do know that there is a consensus that sanctions hurt the people of Iraq too much and perhaps Saddam Hussein not enough. Did the two of you discuss ways of changing the sanctions to make them tougher on him and a little less punishing for the people of Iraq? And if not, how do you hope to keep the coalition together? You already have some NATO Allies, even, who are questioning the value of the sanctions.

President Bush. Well, that's the work we've got to do. First, our beef is not with the people of Iraq; it's with Saddam Hus-

sein. And secondly, any time anybody suffers in Iraq, we're concerned about it. And I would, however, remind you that Saddam's got a lot of oil money, and it would be helpful if he would apply it to helping his people. Having said that, to the extent that sanctions are hurting the Iraqi people, we're going to analyze that.

Colin is really going to listen. He's going to solicit opinion from our friends and folks in the Middle East. And prior to the formulation of any policy, we will have listened, and then I will, of course, consult with friends and allies such as the Prime Minister here, as we develop a policy that we hope and know will be more realistic.

The Prime Minister said something interesting, though. A change in sanctions should not in any way, shape, or form, embolden Saddam Hussein. He has got to understand that we are going to watch him carefully, and if we catch him developing weapons of mass destruction, we'll take the appropriate action. And if we catch him threatening his neighbors, we will take the appropriate action. A change in the sanction regime that is not working should not be any kind of signal whatsoever to him that he should cross any line of—and test our will, because we're absolutely determined to make that part of the world a more peaceful place by keeping this guy in check.

Q. Thank you very much.

President Bush. See you at the gym.

NOTE: The President's news conference began at 4:45 p.m. in the Green Top Camp Dining Hall. In his remarks, he referred to Prime Minister Blair's wife, Cherie; President Vladimir Putin of Russia; and President Saddam Hussein of Iraq.