

Interview With Matt Lauer of NBC's "Today" Show in Covington,
Louisiana
October 11, 2005

Mr. Lauer. Two of the volunteers this morning are the President of the United States and the First Lady. President Bush, good to see you again; Mrs. Bush, nice to have you here.

The First Lady. Hi, Matt.

Recovery From Hurricanes Katrina and Rita

Mr. Lauer. Eight trips to this region for you since September 2d—six, I believe, for you, Mrs. Bush. Give me a sense of the biggest change you've seen over the past 6 or 7 weeks in this area.

The President. I think we've seen the spirits change. I mean, the storm hit; it was an overwhelming moment for a lot of people. And then they're beginning to realize, people—the local people are beginning to realize there's hope; there's a chance to rebuild lives. And a lot of people care about them.

I've seen some infrastructure change. The debris is being cleared, and roads are being rebuilt. And it's a remarkable spirit here in this part of the world. I mean, people say, "Look, we're going to rebuild our lives," and they've realized a lot of people from around the country want to help them.

Schools in Flood Ravaged Areas

Mr. Lauer. And as you see the progress, you also see how much remains to be done.

The First Lady. Sure.

Mr. Lauer. Schools still need to be reopened—

The First Lady. That's true.

Mr. Lauer. —health facilities and all that sort of thing.

The First Lady. Well, I'm worried about the schools. I'm really interested in that. But I'm also proud that so many people have gone to school, so many parents have

put their kids in school wherever they are, if they're in Houston or Fort Worth or Baton Rouge or wherever, and I think that's really important.

Responsibility for Response to Hurricanes

Mr. Lauer. So much more visibility on your part, President Bush, following Hurricane Rita and, as I mentioned, the eight trips to this region, as compared to what was seen as a slow and inefficient Federal response after Hurricane Katrina. Is this one of those situations where you're trying to get a second chance to make a first impression?

The President. I do my job as best I can. One of the things that we do is we respond to crises. And as I told the people, if I didn't respond well enough, we're going to learn the lessons. If there's any mistakes made at the Federal level, I, of course, accept responsibility for them.

On the other hand, there's a lot of good that's taken place, a lot of people are working hard. We had chopper drivers pulling people off roofs. We had, you know, people working long hours to save lives, and the story will unfold. I mean, the facts of the story will come out over time, and the important thing is for Federal, State, and local governments to adjust and to respond.

Plans for Rebuilding

Mr. Lauer. I talked to a prominent Democrat in Louisiana who has said that this type of appearance, while it's great to see you guys rolling up your sleeves and grabbing a hammer and helping with this piece of wall here, that it's a photo op, and they want to see a plan on paper, your plan to rebuild this region. Do you have that kind of a plan?

The President. Well, Matt, you see, I don't think Washington ought to dictate to

New Orleans how to rebuild. I guess we have a different philosophy than whoever the prominent Democrat was you spoke to. Last night Laura and I had dinner with Mayor Nagin and a group of distinguished New Orleans citizens from all walks of life. And my message to them was, "We will support the plan that you develop."

The point is, is that it comes from the local folks. And I recognize there's an attitude in Washington that says, "We know better than the local people." That's just not the attitude I have.

Forgiveness Clause

Mr. Lauer. There was recently a loan package approved by Congress, a billion dollars in emergency loans for the States hardest hit by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. That's the good news. Some Democrats complain that there was wording taken out of that loan package, a forgiveness clause that has traditionally been included in loan packages in the past. And they're wondering why these three States were singled out. Would you ask Congress to go back into that legislation and reinstate the forgiveness clause?

The President. I think Congress—what Congress said was—is that the previous loans were limited to a relatively small amount of money. These loans are much greater loans, and that what Congress has said is, "You'll have 5 years to repay, plus an additional 5 years to repay." And so I think it's a kind of package that Congress was comfortable with giving, and I was happy to sign it.

Politics and Voluntarism in Disaster Relief

Mr. Lauer. Carolyn Maloney, who, as you know, is a Democrat from New York, a Congresswoman, said—

The President. You're quoting a lot of Democrats today, Matt. That's interesting. [Laughter]

Mr. Lauer. She said that we aren't asking the people of Iraq to pay back the money we're spending there. Why are we asking

the people of the gulf coast, requiring them to pay back this money? How would you respond to that?

The President. Well, the people of Iraq are paying a heavy price for terrorism. A lot of people are dying, Matt. These people are working hard to establish democracy, and they're paying a serious price. Look, I understand there are a lot of politics. One of the things that I suggested was we keep the politics out of New Orleans and Mississippi as we all work together to rebuild these communities. And we've got people here who volunteered their time, from all over the country, and they didn't say, you know, "I'm a Democrat, and I'm going to work here," or, "I'm a Republican, and I'm going to come and work here." They said, "I'm an American that wants to contribute."

And the reason why Laura and I are here is because we want to encourage other Americans to help somebody find shelter or help somebody find food or to continue to express the incredible compassion that the country saw when displaced persons moved from this part of the world and are scattered around the country.

Mr. Lauer. Which is a good point. So in other words, if someone says to you, "Okay, you're moving a wall today, and it's a photo op," but if that inspires someone else in another community to move a wall and grab a hammer, then that's mission accomplished?

The First Lady. That's right. And also, this gives us a chance to thank the people who do this all the time, not just in a crisis situation but who volunteer with Habitat in their towns wherever they are across the country or volunteer in a million other ways—working in schools or other ways. And this is really, really important, and it's very American to step out and help.

The President. I understand there's a lot of politics, and you keep talking about this politician or that politician. I think our job

is to elevate this whole process out of normal politics. Frankly, we're supposed to—

Mr. Lauer. Is that possible, though? I mean, isn't it inevitable it will be bogged down in politics?

The President. It depends on who asks the questions, I guess. I think most Americans aren't interested in this kind of politics. I think most Americans are interested in contributing. And the amazing thing about Katrina and Rita is that there has been a fantastic response by people from all walks of life that have welcomed a neighbor and said, "Brother, what can I do to help you?" Or, "How can I show you love?" And I applaud the "Today" show and Habitat for Humanity and your partners in being a part of a larger picture of helping people rebuild their lives. It's a great contribution.

Associate Justice-Designate Harriet E. Miers

Mr. Lauer. While I have you here and while you don't have a hammer in your hand, can I ask you—well, you have it in your belt—[laughter]—about some things going on in Washington?

The President. Sure.

Mr. Lauer. A lot of criticism coming for your nominee to the Supreme Court, Harriet Miers, from conservatives, people like Trent Lott and Pat Buchanan and George Will and Bill Kristol. Were you taken off-guard a little bit, caught by surprise by the amount of criticism you're getting for Judge Miers?

The President. Well, you know, I made a decision to put somebody on the Court who hadn't been a part of what they call the judicial monastery. In other words—I listened, by the way, to people in the Senate who suggested, "Why don't you get somebody from the outside." And I figured that people are going to kind of question whether or not it made sense to bring somebody from outside the court.

I would remind those, one, that Harriet is an extraordinary, accomplished woman

who has done a lot. As a matter of fact, she has consistently ranked as one of the top 50 women lawyers in the United States, that she has broken the glass ceiling. She has served as a great example. She is a brilliant person. And that just because she hasn't served on the bench doesn't mean that she can't be a great Supreme Court Justice.

Mr. Lauer. But you know, conservatives are worried about what's going to happen when she gets on the bench, and they're worried about what's going to happen in the future. And I get the feeling—and I'm not sure if this is too strong—I get the feeling some conservatives, President Bush, are feeling let down by you, and they're thinking they've supported you for so long and when an issue that is so important to them comes up, that you let them down. How would you answer that?

The President. My answer is Harriet Miers is going to be confirmed, and people will get to see why I put her on the bench. She is an extraordinary woman. She is—

Mr. Lauer. You said she is the most qualified candidate for the job—

The President. As I told you.

Mr. Lauer. —would you agree with that?

The First Lady. Absolutely. Absolutely.

Mr. Lauer. You had pushed for a woman to be a nominee.

The First Lady. That's right. And I know Harriet well. I know how accomplished she is. I know how many times she's broken the glass ceiling, herself. She's a role model for young women around our country.

Mr. Lauer. Some are suggesting—

The First Lady. Not only that, she's very deliberate and thoughtful and will bring dignity to wherever she goes, but certainly to the Supreme Court she'll be really excellent.

Mr. Lauer. Some are suggesting there's a little possible sexism in the criticism of Judge Miers. How do you feel about that?

The First Lady. That's possible. I think that's possible. I think she is so accomplished, and I know—I think people are not looking at her accomplishments and not realizing that she was the first elected woman to be the head of the Texas Bar Association, for instance, and all the other things. She was the first woman managing partner of a major law firm. She was the first woman hired by a major law firm, her law firm.

The President. My attitude, Matt, is when people get to know her, they'll see why I picked her.

The First Lady. They will. In the confirmation hearings alone, they'll see that she—what she's like.

Mr. Lauer. I think the Washington Times has a story this morning that said they had about 27 Republican Senators have serious questions about Judge Miers—or about Harriet Miers—

The President. No, Judge Miers—well spoken.

Mr. Lauer. I was going to say—kind of getting ahead of myself here. So you are convinced that she will be confirmed?

The President. Absolutely. Not only am I convinced that she'll be confirmed; I'm convinced that she'll be a fine, great judge. And I'm convinced that she'll be the kind of—she won't change. I mean, the person I know is not the kind of person that is going to change her philosophy. And her philosophy is, is that she is not going to legislate from the bench. So I told the American people when I campaigned for President the type of judge I'll pick. I picked that type of person in John Roberts, and I picked that type of person in Harriet Miers.

Deputy Chief of Staff Karl Rove/CIA Employee's Identity Disclosure Investigation

Mr. Lauer. Your political guru, Karl Rove, is set to—or scheduled to testify before a grand jury for the fourth time this coming week, it seems, looking into the

leak of a CIA agent's name. You've said if someone on your staff had anything to do with that leak, you'll take care of that person. Has Karl Rove looked you in the eye, Mr. President, and said, "I, in no way, bent or broke the rules or the law when it comes to this case"?

The President. Matt, I've also consistently said I'm not going to talk about the case. It's under review, so I'm not going to talk about it. Thank you for asking, but—on the other hand, the special prosecutor has made it clear—and made it clear—that he doesn't want anybody speculating or talking about the case, so I'm not going to talk about it.

Mr. Lauer. But does it worry you that they seem to have such an interest in Mr. Rove?

The President. I'm not going to talk about the case. I've been asked this a lot; my answer is consistent. The special prosecutor is conducting a very serious investigation. He's doing it in a very dignified way, by the way, and we'll see what he says.

Iraq

Mr. Lauer. Got a big date coming up in Iraq this coming week, on the 15th, a vote on the referendum on the constitution there. What do you expecting to happen there? And what are you expecting to happen in the days leading up to that vote?

The President. I expect violence, because there's a group of terrorists and killers who want to try to stop the advance of democracy in Iraq. I also expect people to vote, which is a remarkable achievement. We had a remarkable achievement last January when millions of people voted. They now have a chance to vote on a constitution that will help unify the country. And then they'll have a chance to vote, if the constitution passes, on a permanent government.

And so what you're seeing is the unfolding of a dual-track strategy. On the one hand, democracy is advancing, much to the

amazement of a lot of people, particularly people in the region. And on the other hand, we're working to train Iraqi troops so they can provide the security for a democracy to move forward.

Avian Flu

Mr. Lauer. I'm going to let you get back to work in a second. I'm just curious about one other subject, and you've spoken about this recently, this whole issue of a possible worldwide pandemic, this avian flu. You know, 60 people have died in Asia so far. They're worried that if this comes here, there are, by some estimates—this could claim millions of lives around the world.

After Hurricane Katrina, there are some people in this country who are worried. They're not sure who's in charge, who do I turn to, who's going to handle a major catastrophe in this country? Are you confident that this administration has a plan in place to handle something like that?

The President. I'm confident that we're working to identify the possible outbreak of avian flu, contain it to where the outbreak takes place, and strategize how to deal with it if it ever were to come to the United States.

Mr. Lauer. Who would take the lead in that? Would it be a military situation? Would it be homeland security?

The President. It's a really interesting question, and it's one that I raised that has created a little bit of consternation among some. I have said that there may be a catastrophic event such that the Federal Government has got the—it's only the Federal Government that has got the capacity to move in quickly with a lot of resources, which would require law changes. For example, the military cannot become police without a special proclamation.

And so we're planning all this out. We're in the midst of, one, identifying that there may be a problem, and, two, what to do about it. When I have a plan that I'm com-

fortable with, of course I will talk to the American people about it.

Voluntarism

Mr. Lauer. Your husband has been through an awful lot—

The First Lady. Our country has been through an awful lot.

Mr. Lauer. What toll have you seen this take, personally, on him? Not only—you know, we had 9/11 in the first term, and now we've got Iraq, and we've got Katrina, and we've got Rita. What toll have you seen this take?

The First Lady. Well—

The President. He can barely stand. He's about to drop on the spot. [*Laughter*]

The First Lady. He's doing great. He's got big, broad shoulders. There's a lot, but there's a lot on the American people too, and their response has been so terrific. You know, we can face challenges, and they're tough, and this is very tough down here. The number of people, the huge number of people that are displaced, that have lost everything, but you know, people are rebuilding their lives, and other people want to help them, and that's what I see.

The President. You know, I'm the kind of guy who gets inspired by the decency of others, and as I travel the country and see this incredible spirit, it's so uplifting. It makes me understand how blessed we are to be an American. These folks right here—I never met them before, but they're from all over the country. They're here for one reason, to love a neighbor. And that's a remarkable expression. And Laura and I want to thank them, and we want to encourage others around the country to do—to follow their lead and follow their example.

Mr. Lauer. Well, this is going to be the home of the Collins family, and we're going to talk to the Collins family in a little while.

The First Lady. That's great.

Mr. Lauer. Mrs. Bush, President Bush, thanks so much for your time this morning.

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The President. Thanks, Matt, appreciate it.

The First Lady. Thanks, Matt.

Mr. Lauer. Grab your hammers, and go back to work. [*Laughter*]

NOTE: The interview was taped at 6:07 a.m. at the Habitat for Humanity site for later

broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to Mayor C. Ray Nagin of New Orleans, LA; and Patrick J. Fitzgerald, U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois, and Department of Justice CIA leak investigation Special Prosecutor.

Remarks to Reporters in Pass Christian, Mississippi October 11, 2005

Listen, first I want to thank the superintendent for inviting us here. The schools of Pass Christian are blue ribbon schools. And they have been blue ribbon schools before, and they'll be blue ribbon schools in the future. Part of the health of a community is to have a school system that's vibrant and alive. And in spite of the fact that a lot of equipment was damaged and homes destroyed and teachers without places to live and—this school district is strong, and it's coming back. And it's a sign that out of the rubble here on the gulf coast of Mississippi is a rebuilding, is a spirit of rebuilding.

And thank you all for having us. I want to thank the principals and teachers for understanding the quality of education—the quality of the education in a community helps define the nature of the community. And one of the things that's interesting is the high school principal told Laura and me that the—and Madam Secretary—that

the high school was deemed to be a blue ribbon high school after Katrina hit. And yet a lot of the students don't know that yet. And so when the high school comes back next Monday, the first thing the principal is going to tell them is that the school that they go to, even though the building is different—the buildings are different—is a blue ribbon high school.

And the superintendent says, blue ribbon high school last year, this year, and next year. And I appreciate your spirit. Thanks for letting us come by.

Thank you all. Bye-bye. Good to meet you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:54 a.m. at DeLisle Elementary School. In his remarks, he referred to Sue Matheson, superintendent, Pass Christian School District; Cathy Broadway, principal, Pass Christian High School; and Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings.

Remarks at the Joint Reserve Base at the U.S. Naval Air Station in New Orleans, Louisiana October 11, 2005

Generals, thanks—General Landreaneau and General Downer, thank you all for greeting me here. I'm proud to be traveling

with Members of the United States Congress who are with us today. Listen, I'm here to thank you all for what has been