

This vision will take years to achieve, but we can proceed with confidence because we know the power of freedom to transform lives and cultures and overcome tyranny and terror. We can proceed with confidence because we have two partners—two strong partners—in India and Pakistan.

Some people have said the 21st century will be the Asian century. I believe the 21st century will be freedom's century. And together, free Asians and free Americans will seize the opportunities this new century offers and lay the foundation of peace and prosperity for generations to come.

May God bless India and Pakistan. May God continue to bless the United States.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:47 a.m. at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel. In his remarks, he referred to Vishakha N. Desai, president, and Richard C. Holbrooke, executive committee chairman, Asia Society; Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Ambassador to the U.S. Ronen Sen, and President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam of India; President Pervez Musharraf and Ambassador to the U.S. Jehangir Karamat of Pakistan; and Usama bin Laden, leader of the Al Qaida terrorist organization.

Interview With Pakistani Journalists *February 22, 2006*

The President. Thanks for coming. I'm looking forward to going to Pakistan. I appreciate the courage of your President—I'm looking forward to my visit with President Musharraf. I'm trying to think of the number of times I have met with President Musharraf since I've been the President. I would say five or six, seven times. I remember our visit to Camp David.

Q. I was there.

The President. He is—were you there?

Q. Yes.

The President. I appreciate his courage. I appreciate the difficult job he has. I appreciate his commitment to joining the world in dealing with Islamic radicals who will murder innocent people to achieve an objective. I appreciate the fact that he has stood strong in the face of several attempts on his life. I also appreciate our relationship with Pakistan and his vision for a democracy in Pakistan. And so I'm looking forward to the trip. The Prime Minister was here several weeks ago. We had a very good talk. And he was laying the groundwork for what I think will be a constructive visit. Be glad to answer some questions.

Reaction to Prophet Muhammad Depictions

Q. Mr. President, I'll start with the cartoon controversy. You and your allies work very hard on bridging the gap between the Islamic and the Western world, but the publication of a few cartoons in a remote newspaper seems to have undone everything. Why?

The President. First of all, I think it's very important for people around the world to know that a free press is important for a democratic state; a free press—for peaceful states as well. Free press holds people to account. Free press makes sure that there is a check and a balance on people in power. Free press also must be a responsible press.

Secondly, I fully understand people taking—not liking the cartoons. On the other hand, I do not believe that people should use that as a pretext for violence, nor do I appreciate the fact that some are using—manipulating the anger over the cartoons to achieve political ends. And therefore, it's very important for governments to not allow policy to be set by those who are cynically manipulating the anger that some have felt over these cartoons.

Nuclear Energy in Developing Nations

Q. Mr. President, you have announced this global nuclear energy initiative, and this is the one that you have offered to India also. And you have spoken about the countries—countries like India can also get a benefit of this initiative. Do you have Pakistan in mind—Pakistan already saying that this offer to India is India-specific? Is it India-specific, or Pakistan can also be included in this initiative?

The President. Well, we are starting with India, and one of the primary reasons why is that India is in need of a diversification away from fossil fuels. India is consuming a lot of fossil fuel. That is driving up the price of—a part of the reasons why the price is rising. America uses a lot of fossil fuels. China is using more fossil fuels. India is using more fossil fuels, and it's affecting the price of energy in the United States and in India and in Pakistan. And so therefore, to the extent to which we can get these fast-growing, developing nations to use something other than fossil fuels, it's in the world's interest, and it's in Pakistan's interest as well.

Now—and so I would not view—some say, “Well, this is a zero-sum attitude by the United States,” quite the contrary. It's the beginning of a policy that says, there will be a suppliers group of people who are capable of providing fuel stocks for a civilian nuclear power industry, countries that will then collect the spent fuel, reprocess it to be able to burn it in new types of reactors.

The purpose of this whole initiative, and beginning with countries like India, is to recognize that alternative sources of energy are going to be important for the development of a clean world and a world that becomes substantially less reliant on non-renewable sources of energy.

Q. But Pakistan can't be included in that?

The President. Well, as I said, this is just the beginning of a very long process.

Kashmir

Q. Mr. President, in your speech, you talked about Kashmir dispute, and you said that you would like India and Pakistan to take bilateral steps to resolve the dispute. Pakistan has made certain proposals, but they are not reciprocated by India. And it seems that this bilateral is not going anywhere; there's need for a third-party mediation or some sort of help. Do you have any specific proposals for that?

The President. First, I'd like to make sure I clarify my statement for all to read. America supports a solution that is acceptable to all sides—since you're probably the only person in the room that paid attention to my speech—the speech, as you know, I said, “to both sides.” The language should be “all sides,” because it recognizes that a solution must be acceptable to India, Pakistan, and those living within Kashmir.

Our position is one that says a dispute that has been so long in a nation's history can best be resolved when two nations make the determination to sit down and come up with a solution that is acceptable to all sides. Of course, during my discussions, I will encourage that dialog to go forward. I'm convinced that history changes, and as history changes, attitudes can change, circumstances change, and that we have a possibility to see this issue resolved by strong and courageous leaders.

I'm pleased to see the amount of trade that's taking place between India and Pakistan. It's a substantial increase from July of '04 to July of '05. I thought that the—the new transportation routes between India and Pakistan are hopeful signs.

And so the role of the United States, in our judgment, is one that will help lead to a settlement that is acceptable to all sides.

Democracy in Pakistan

Q. Mr. President, you also spoke about democracy in Pakistan; some distance has to be covered. And the Commonwealth has recently asked Mr. Musharraf—President

Musharraf that he must decide by 2007 whether he wants to continue as the Chief of Army Staff or as the President, one decision. Is the United States comfortable with a leader who is also the Chief of Army Staff in a democracy? Does it bother you that he—his contribution as the Chief of Army Staff?

The President. I've had discussions with the President quite frequently about his vision for a democratic Pakistan. And I am—I believe that he is headed for a—continue to head for—on the road of reform. And he understands the pressures being put on him. As you said, the Commonwealth spoke, and I believe that he's committed to having a reform process come to fruition, and I believe he's committed to free and open elections.

Iran

Q. Mr. President, there is another issue that is particularly sensitive for both India and Pakistan, which is that Iran—India-Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. As we said, India—need alternative sources of energy. So is it possible that—decision, allow the construction of the pipeline?

The President. What's important is that India, Pakistan, and the United States work together to send a firm message to the Iranians that a development of a nuclear weapon is unacceptable. You know, we—energy supplies are important for India, and they're important for Pakistan. I fully understand that. But a country which has been unwilling to adhere to treaties that it's agreed to, a country the President of which has said the destruction of Israel is in—part of foreign policy, a country which has not told the truth when it comes to whether or not they're enriching uranium or not, is a country that free nations need to deal with in a diplomatic way. And the best thing that the Iranians can hear is a unified message from all of us.

Q. Does it mean that at some date you could decide to take military action against Iran? Would you—

The President. Diplomacy is our first option.

War on Terror

Q. Mr. President, the recent incident in which U.S. military made a strike in the Pakistani tribal area in the Bajaur area. This has happened before also, and there was some outrage in Pakistan that there was no remorse from the U.S. Government on the action. These actions, when they are taken, is it because—the unilateral action that the folks on the other side do not trust their colleagues on the side of the border, or it's the timing, is it intelligence, or the lack of operational capabilities on the side—on the Pakistani side, that such actions are taken?

The President. We are—we're partners in the war against terrorists, some of whom tried to kill your President. We coordinate. We're allies, and we coordinate—nor do we talk about sensitive antiterror operations. Of course, the United States mourns the loss of innocent life.

Pakistan-U.S. Trade Relations/Earthquake in Pakistan

Q. Mr. President, in your speech, you also—you spoke about importance of prosperity, and you talked about offering business—industry in Pakistan. Do you have anything specific in mind, such as Pakistan has been trying for some time to get an FTA?

The President. First step is a BIT, and we will discuss that—we will continue to discuss that. We discussed that during the Prime Minister's trip, and we will continue to pursue this avenue toward opening up additional opportunities, commercial opportunities between our respective countries.

First things first, however—there have been some preliminary discussions, as well, about perhaps some trading arrangements in the Western Provinces of Pakistan. These are preliminary discussions. We think it makes sense to have a discussion. Such

an agreement, if—a commercial arrangement, investment arrangement would be beneficial not only to Pakistan but to Afghanistan as well. And so there's a variety of discussions we're having to continue to open up ways to encourage investment and commerce.

I must—I applaud the President's economic reform package. It's yielded some strong results. Pakistan's economy is growing, and that's positive. You know, one of the key things is that people see the benefits of democracy—the tangible benefits of democracy, besides being able to express themselves. Today I also referred to the Pakistan press, you might recall. I think I referred to you as lively, meaning that—at least the Pakistan press I've been exposed to has never been afraid to ask any questions, or never been intimidated, particularly with the open press conference. And I suspect it might be the same when I go next week.

So I want to talk about reconstruction aid right quick before you finish. It's very important for the people of Pakistan to—and this is where trade matters as well, and commerce matters as well, that they see that the United States is interested in the lives of the citizens. You know, sometimes in the way things get reported, our policies get disconnected from people's lives improving. And we want that to happen, because a prosperous Pakistan is—will be a great example, a country that believes in markets and educating people to fill the jobs of the 21st century, and a country that continues to deal with rules and regulations that make investment difficult at times, will show what's possible. And that's important.

When the disaster struck, it took our Government no time to move. And we moved a lot of equipment and a lot of manpower and a lot of aid, because we cared about the people that were suffering. I remember President Musharraf calling me on the phone at one point to thank me. And it was a genuine thanks, because

we were—as you know, we transferred a lot of choppers, which were necessary to be able to move manpower and aid into remote regions of your country.

He also asked, would we make sure that beyond the recovery effort, that there was a commitment to help rebuild. And my answer was, yes. And the reason—it's important for your readers to understand, I said, yes, because this country cares about the families whose lives were turned upside down by this disaster. When we heard 73,000 people lost their life, it touched our hearts and our conscience. When we realized over 2 million people lost their homes, we cared about those who had been displaced.

And so our commitment is to the people of Pakistan, and it's a genuine, real, tangible commitment that the people of the country can see. I understand there's politics, and there's—there's people expressing their opinions. But one thing they can't argue with—those who want to be critical of the United States can't argue with a genuine, heartfelt commitment to the improvement of the lives of those folks in Pakistan who suffered a—suffered mightily as a result of the natural disaster.

Final question, Kamran. Kamran.

Q. Yes, Kamran.

The President. Kamran.

War on Terror/U.S. Visa Policy

Q. Mr. President, being an ally, there are some expectations. We captured the top lot of the Al Qaida, and 300 Pakistani soldiers died. There is a lot of expectation in Pakistan—you spoke about bilateral investment treaty and stuff, access to the market—more on access to the market. Are we moving towards free trade?

And secondly, Pakistani students, sir, having terrible problems getting visas to the U.S. And that's very important—folks not getting to the U.S. for education, and can you help us?

The President. A couple of points—one, there's no question that the Musharraf

Government is committed to working to get Al Qaida brought to justice. It was Al Qaida that tried to kill him more than one time. And he also recognizes Al Qaida's presence is destabilizing. Al Qaida doesn't care about the people of Pakistan. They don't care about helping people get a good education, realize the vast potential of Pakistan. They're there to create chaos and murder. And so I appreciate that, and I appreciate his firm resolve.

Secondly, we have been—there is a tangible benefit for the Government and the security of Pakistan in dealing with—using—sharing with, providing equipment. We resolved a long-simmering issue in the F-16s. I recognize it has been put on hold, but the Government's commitment is a real commitment. It changed policy, as you recall. It reversed something that took place in the past.

The BIT is a beginning of—it's a step toward what you talked about, advancing—additional trading.

I agree with you on the issue of education. First of all, there are a lot of Pakistani citizens here, and a lot of Pakistani Americans that are making vital contributions to our country, proud United States citizens who honor their heritage.

I agree with you that there ought to be more student exchanges. But this is not an issue just for Pakistani students; this is an issue for students from other parts of the world as well. We had a very restrictive visa policy right after 9/11. It was a—our visa policy was a natural reaction to a terrible event that took place. But by—it didn't take me long to realize that we were missing a great opportunity to have students from Pakistan see the real America. And there's no better place, no better way in many ways to see America than to come as a student, study at our institutions, but more importantly, interface with people the same age and realize that ours is an accepting culture.

Q. Absolutely.

The President. And we welcome Muslims. And we welcome people that may be different, and that there's no better ambassador for the American way of life and the attitudes—the true attitudes of the American citizens than to have somebody here who has seen firsthand what America is like and then go back home. Word of mouth is a pretty significant antidote to some of the propaganda that is being played out for others to hear. And so I agree with you, and we're—Condi Rice is very much involved with constantly revisiting the visa issue—student visa issue, in particular, and not only encouraging students to come here, but once they're here, not making it difficult for them to complete their education. In other words, there are some restrictions even after the students got here.

Finally, we are also—along these lines announced a very strong language initiative so that more people are capable of—will be capable of conversing with people in parts of the world where, frankly, we haven't had that much conversation in their native language—all aimed at creating a hospitable world. And this trip will help send a message to the people of Pakistan: One, we're proud of the Pakistani Americans who live here; two, we want this relation to continue on. It's a vital relationship. And as I say, I am pleased with my personal relationship with President Musharraf. I try to put myself in his shoes. He is—he's got a tough assignment. On the one hand, he's got people trying to kill him, and on the other hand, he's taking this country toward—further down the road of democracy, and in so doing, is dealing with—as we speak, dealing with people who are taking advantage of a free press.

And as I mentioned to you, I understand why people are reacting to that. It's very important, however, that they react in a way that does honor to the process and not resort to violence and destruction and, in some countries, to death.

And so looking forward to it. See you all there, I hope.

President's Upcoming Visit to Pakistan

Q. Mr. President, one last——

The President. Yes.

Q. About the visit, can you state if you ever think of canceling the visit——

The President. No, I'm not going to—— never thought about canceling it.

Q. No?

The President. Of course not.

Q. Because——

The President. No, zero, zero chance.

U.S. Visa Policy

Q. So we are a good word for the students, they may get visas?

The President. Well, I think we're working it very hard to make sure. Obviously, Ambassador Crocker and the Embassy there is the conscience. I will pass this on to Condi when I talk to her just to make sure that she's—she's constantly calibrating and looking at the issue. We hear—believe

we've had a lot of—there are a lot of folks here that—in America, and a lot of Embassies around the world hear from respective governments when there's backlogs and slowness. These voices that are concerned about whether or not there's access to our universities are heard loud and clear. Believe me, it's——

Q. Mr. President, best antidote is exposing people to American people.

The President. There you go.

Q. That's the best antidote you have.

The President. Well, thank you.

Q. Don't restrict that.

The President. Don't worry. Glad you're here. Good job.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 2:11 p.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In his remarks, the President referred to President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz of Pakistan; and President Mahmud Ahmadi-nejad of Iran. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this interview.

Remarks at a Celebration of African American History Month
February 22, 2006

The President. Welcome. Please be seated. Thanks for coming. Welcome to the White House. So glad you could join us for the 80th—celebration of America—African American History Month. We're here today to mark the achievements of African Americans in our country's history and to honor the contributions so many African Americans are making to our land today.

I appreciate the Vice President joining us. I want to thank the Secretary of Health and Human Services—[laughter]—he's constantly trying to promote himself—the Secretary of HUD, Alphonso Jackson. Looking sharp today. [Laughter] Keeping good company too, by the way. I want to thank the

other members of my administration who have joined us.

I particularly want to pay my respects to Dr. Dorothy Height, president emeritus and founder—[applause]. I couldn't help but noticing A.C. Green. [Laughter] Thanks, A.C., for setting such a good example and using your position to help others. It's an honor you're here; really appreciate you coming.

This month, we gather to honor the generations of heroes who called on our Nation to live up to its founding promise of equality—people like Dorothy Height. The past year, we lost two of these heroes, women whose grace and determination helped