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This past month has been a time of testing for our country. And the American people have responded with resolve and strength and optimism. Whatever challenges may come, we can be confident our Nation is strong; our purpose is firm; and our cause is just.

Thank you for coming. May God bless you, and may God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:13 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to former President Saddam Hussein of Iraq; Lt. Col. Damon T. Walsh, USA, Army plant commander, and Gary King, plant manager, Lima Army Tank Plant; Maj. Gen. N. Ross Thompson III, USA, commander, U.S. Army Tank-Automotive and Armaments Command; Jeff Monroe, president, UAW local 2075; Gov. Bob Taft of Ohio; Mayor David J. Berger of Lima; Gen. Tommy R. Franks, USA, combatant commander, U.S. Central Command; and Lt. Gen. Jay Garner, USA (Ret.), Director, Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance for Postwar Iraq, Department of Defense.

Interview With Tom Brokaw of NBC News

April 24, 2003

Preemptive Strike Against Saddam Hussein

Mr. Brokaw. Mr. President, there's no tougher decision any President makes than to commit the Nation to war. Let's talk about that first night, when you surprised us all by launching the preemptive strike against the residence of Saddam Hussein.

The President. Well, they started in the Situation Room, and we had Tommy Franks on the screen with a commander—I think out of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait City and out of—and a CENTCOM commander out of Tampa Bay, along with their British and Australian counterparts.

And then we had the national security team aligned on the table there, and I went around to each of the commanders and said, "Are you happy with the strategy? Do you have what it takes to win the war?" They all answered affirmatively.

I then gave the instructions to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld that Operation Iraqi Freedom would commence at a time of Tommy Franks' choosing, told Tommy, you know, for the sake of peace and security and the freedom of the Iraqi people that he's got the orders to proceed. I asked God's blessing on him and the troops. He saluted. I saluted back and left the room.

It was a—it was an emotional moment for me because I had obviously made up my mind that if we needed to, we would use troops to get rid of weapons of mass destruction to free the Iraqi people. But the actual moment of making that decision was a heavy moment. I then went outside and walked around the grounds, just to get a little air and collect my thoughts.

And I thought I was pretty well through with the day until 3:40 that afternoon, when I got a call from Secretary Rumsfeld that said, "Mr. President, the plans have changed." He said, "I would like to change the plans. I need your permission to change the plans. Can I come over?" He didn't say the plans had changed, but I knew what he'd told me on the phone, it would mean the plans would have changed. And that is, we had a shot at Saddam Hussein, they thought.

So I assembled the national security team of the Vice President, Colin Powell, Rumsfeld, Myers, CIA Tenet, Condi Rice, Andy Card, and some other CIA agents there—some guys I hadn't seen before came in the Oval. And the reason why they were there is they had a source on the ground that was convinced that not only would Saddam Hussein be in the complex, but Uday and Qusay, his two sons, would be there as well. And they explained why this was the case. And basically they were asking permission from me to launch an airstrike.

I was hesitant at first, to be frank with you, because I was worried that the first pictures coming out of Iraq would be a wounded grandchild of Saddam Hussein—but Saddam Hussein, who was not there at the time we started making the decision, would never show up—that the first images of the American attack would be death to young children.

And this is an interesting moment, because as time went on during the day, that evening, the intelligence got richer and richer. In other words, the guy on the ground was calling in to the CENTCOM headquarters, who was immediately calling in to the White

House—more and more information. For example, he discovered that there was a bunker 100 feet away from one of the houses, a bunker that had so much concrete and was likely to house Saddam when he arrived and his kids, his boys.

And as the intelligence got richer, I got more confidence with the notion that Saddam would, in fact, be there. And at 7:15 that evening, I gave the order for Tommy to proceed with an attack on the farms, but changed—they had an ordnance package of 30 cruise missiles. But because of the bunker, they had to change the timing of the attack so that the stealth bomber went in first, unloaded his ordnance, and then the TLAMs or the cruise missiles would follow in behind, which means they had to reprogram all these missiles. And they didn't have much time to do it because the flight time of the missiles from their particular launch sites was about 2 hours.

This other thing that bothered me during the decisionmaking was that the stealth would go in unescorted. There would have been no air suppression on enemy defenses prior to him going in, in order to keep the element of surprise alive. So the day changed, and it was a dramatic several hours because we really changed the battle plan.

Mr. Brokaw. Did you watch that on television, when the bombs began to land?

The President. Yes, I did. I did. Actually, they began to hit, and then I went in and shortly thereafter addressed the Nation—so I was getting makeup and talking about the—you know, figuring out the words in the speech. I did. And it was about 9:30 p.m., as I recall, and then I spoke to the country about 10:15 p.m.

But what was interesting, Tom—I don't think many people know this—is that the game plan was to move Special Ops forces early, at noon that day. And we would have explained to the country, as kind of creating the conditions for the battlefield, so that when our troops moved significantly, their conditions would be ripe for success.

At Friday, at noon, I was going to address the Nation about the air campaign, and the ground campaign would follow shortly thereafter. Turns out that because we conducted the air raid, I had to speak that night to the country. And then Tommy said he was going to move the ground force movement up early to secure oilfields and to move as quickly as possible into Iraq, which really says that he had the ability and the authority and the flexibility necessary to change a war plan to meet the needs on the ground.

Mr. Brokaw. That human intelligence that we had on the ground, did you hear back from him, I presume?

The President. We did.

Mr. Brokaw. And did he——

The President. He felt like we got Saddam.

Mr. Brokaw. He did?

The President. He felt like that, yes. And we're trying, of course, to verify. And before there's any declaration, of course, there will be a lot of evidence.

Mr. Brokaw. Did you see that famous television video of Saddam the next day, in the glasses, reading awkwardly from the notepad and so on?

The President. Well, yes. I was amused by that, almost as amused by that as I was his PR man—it was one of the classics—probably helping NBC Saturday Night Live out mightily, but through his—it was just unbelievable what he was saying.

But you know, the people that wonder if Saddam Hussein is dead or not, there's some evidence that says that he—suggests he might be. We would never make that declaration until we were more certain. But the person that helped direct the attacks believes that Saddam, at the very minimum, was severely wounded.

Mr. Brokaw. That night?

The President. That night, yes. And it explains—again, there will be a lot of speculation until the truth is known, but it explains why, for example, one reason why dams weren't blown up or oilfields weren't destroyed, even though we found them to be wired with—potentially to be blown up.

Shock and Awe/Iraqi Resistance

Mr. Brokaw. Now, the air campaign is underway, and troops are moving across the border——

The President. That would be a day and a half later.

Mr. Brokaw. A day and a half later.

The President. But troops were moving across the border earlier.

Mr. Brokaw. "Shock and awe" was the phrase that was heard so much before it all began. It didn't have exactly the effect I think that a lot of people expected, because resistance down south was—from the militia, at least—a little tougher than a lot of people anticipated.

The President. Yes, I think it's true. I think that's an accurate look back. "Shock and awe" said to many people that all we've got to do is unleash some might and people will crumble. It turns out the fighters were a lot fiercer than we thought. Because, for example, we didn't come north from Turkey, Saddam Hussein was able to move a lot of special Republican Guard units and fighters from north to south. So the resistance for our troops moving south and north was significant resistance. On the other hand, our troops handled it—we handled that resistance quite well.

President's National Security Team

Mr. Brokaw. Did that give you a pause for a while?

The President. Well, first of all, I had confidence in the plan, because I've got confidence in my national security team. Remember, my advisers are people such as Dick Cheney, who had been through the war before as the Secretary of Defense; Colin Powell, who's not only an Army general but also had been through a war before; Don Rumsfeld, who's a very successful man in the private sector but also has got great judgment when it comes to the military; Tommy Franks—I really trust Tommy; we speak the same language; after all, Tommy went to Midland Lee High School, graduated in 1963, one year ahead of Laura—Condi, and—I mean, I get good, solid advice from people who analyzed this war plan, analyzed the strategy, looked at it in depth, had looked at it for quite a bit of time and convinced me that it would lead to victory.

So I've never doubted the plan. Obviously, I was concerned when we lost life, or concerned that day when some of our prisoners, the people were captured. But I had confidence in the plan because I had confidence in the team.

U.S. Prisoners of War

Mr. Brokaw. Let me ask you about that day that the prisoners were captured. Everything played out on television. There's been probably no more televised event in the history of mankind. Suddenly you look on the screen, and from Iraqi television there are five American prisoners of war, including a woman who was a cook, Shoshana Johnson.

The President. Well, I believe that was a Sunday. And it was a tough day. It was a tough day for America. It was a tough day for the Commander in Chief, who committed these young soldiers into battle in the first place, which made their release even more joyous. But war is—it's tough.

Mr. Brokaw. Did you make some calls?

The President. No, I didn't. I've written a lot of letters, but I didn't call any parents then. I prayed for them, but I didn't call.

Mr. Brokaw. Did you talk to Laura about it?

The President. I did. I talked to Laura a lot during this period of time. She's been a steady source of strength and inspiration and love. And you know, there's—any time there's war and a lot of action, a lot of movement of troops and equipment, people are—there's going to be death. And it's the hardest aspect of this job, frankly, is to know that those lives were lost because of orders I gave.

On the other hand, I firmly believe, and history will prove, that decisions that I made and the actions that our country took will make the world more peaceful, will help secure the United States, and as importantly, give the Iraqi people freedom, let them be free, free from the clutches of one of the most barbaric regimes in the history of mankind.

Rescue of Jessica Lynch

Mr. Brokaw. The flip side of all that was the rescue of Jessica Lynch.

The President. It was.

Mr. Brokaw. Did you get advance notice that that operation was going down?

The President. I did. I did. Secretary Rumsfeld told me that—not to get my hopes up, but there was going to be a very sensitive operation into a hospital where he thought that there would be an American POW. And that's all he said. He was very circumspect,

as he should be, to a lot of people, because he didn't want any information to get out that might have jeopardized the operation. But he gave me a heads-up. And then when we heard that she had been rescued, it was a joyous moment.

Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction

Mr. Brokaw. Let me ask you about some of the larger policy questions. Before we went to war against Iraq, one of the reasons that you justified this war was that he posed a real threat to the United States. If he couldn't defend his own country—and we have not yet been able to find the weapons of mass destruction, which were not even launched in defense of Iraq—was that threat overstated?

The President. No, not at all. As a matter of fact, I think time and investigation will prove a couple of points: One, that he did have terrorist connections; and secondly, that he had a weapons of mass destruction program. We know he had a weapons of mass destruction program. We now know he's not going to use them. So we've accomplished one objective, and that is that Saddam Hussein will not hurt the United States or friends or our allies with weapons of mass destruction.

Secondly, we are learning more as we interrogate or have discussions with Iraqi scientists and people within the Iraqi structure, that perhaps he destroyed some, perhaps he dispersed some. We also know there are hundreds and hundreds of sites available for hiding the weapons, which he did effectively for 10 years from the—over 10 years from the United Nations, and that we've only looked at about 90 of those sites so far—I mean, literally hundreds of sites.

And so we will find them. It's going to take time to find them. And the best way to find them is to continue to collect information from the humans, the Iraqis who were involved with hiding them.

Mr. Brokaw. As you know, there's still a lot of skepticism around the world about American motives in Iraq.

The President. Right.

Mr. Brokaw. Why not fold in some of the U.N. inspectors to this effort, not turn it over to them but make them a part of it? Would that help with the credibility, do you think?

The President. I think there's going to be skepticism until people find out there was, in fact, a weapons of mass destruction program. One thing there can't be skepticism about is the fact that this guy was torturous and brutal on the Iraqi people. I mean, he brutalized them; he tortured them; he destroyed them; he cut out their tongues when they dissented. And now the people are beginning to see what freedom means within Iraq. Look at the Shi'a marches or the Shi'a pilgrimages that are taking place.

The world will see that the United States is interested in peace, is interested in security, and interested in freedom.

Mr. Brokaw. But it is important to find the weapons of mass destruction, or the evidence that he had a massive program underway, isn't it?

The President. Yes. I think we will. I'm pretty confident we will.

Postwar Iraq/New Iraqi Regime

Mr. Brokaw. Your old family friend Brent Scowcroft, who had some differences with the policies here, says one of the things that he's worried about is that there's no tradition of democracy there, that people will just seize power wherever they can. It seems to a lot of people that that is playing out in the south, especially where the Shi'a are saying, "Look, we're going to run things here. We'd like to have an Islamic government." Isn't that a serious concern?

The President. Well, first of all, we just started. The country isn't secure yet. I mean, the first things that we're worried about is making sure that the militia units of the old Fedayeen Saddam aren't out killing people. So our troops are working with coalition forces to make the country more secure.

Secondly, we're worried about making sure there are—you know, there's the presence of a police force in these different cities to maintain order. We are just beginning to move our teams in place to help the Iraqi bureaucracies get up and running.

I was pleased to see that the Doctors Without Borders organization said that they went into Iraq and found no grave humanitarian crisis. In other words, the food is getting to

the people; medicines are getting to the people. They did say there is a shortage of personnel, professionally—not a shortage of medicine but a shortage of professionals necessary to deliver the aid, and we'll help the Iraqi people address that problem.

My point to you is that we have an orderly process to bring stability and food and health to the Iraqi people so life can begin to return to normal. And then I'm confident that a government will emerge. I dismiss the critics who say that democracy can't flourish in Iraq. It may not look like America. You know, Thomas Jefferson may not emerge. But nevertheless, I do believe there can be a representative government and all factions can be represented.

Mr. Brokaw. But if it becomes an Islamic government with a 60 percent Shiite majority, it could very well become that—would that be acceptable to you?

The President. What I would like to see is a government where church and state are separated. And I believe there's enough people within Iraq that would like that kind of—there may be a nationalist government, a government that really honors the Iraqi history and the Iraqi traditions and Iraq, itself. But it must be a government that is going to, you know, represents all the people, and I believe that can happen.

Looting by Iraqi Citizens

Mr. Brokaw. Were you surprised by the degree of looting that occurred almost instantly?

The President. No, I wasn't surprised at all.

Mr. Brokaw. You were not? Why?

The President. I mean, these were people that hated the regime under which they lived.

Mr. Brokaw. But they went after hospitals and museums and——

The President. I don't like that part. And that was the—you know, the hospitals and museum were the absolute worst part. The good news is, is that the hospitals are now up and running. They've got enough medical supplies to take care of the people that need help. That museum was a terrible incident. I couldn't agree more with people who say we're sorry that happened. We are, by the way, helping find treasure, restore treasure, and we'll provide all the expertise and help they need to get that museum up and running again.

But I wasn't surprised. It was vengeance, because it's like uncorking a bottle of frustration. These are people whose relatives were beaten, tortured, shocked, killed because they spoke out, because they disagreed with Saddam Hussein. And history is going to show how brutal this man and his sons and his regime really, really was. And therefore, it did not surprise me when people took vengeance on police stations or took, you know, went out into Government buildings and destroyed them.

I'm also pleased by the fact that that level of—those riots or whatever you want to call them, released some steam, and now life is returning to normal. Things have settled down inside the country.

Mr. Brokaw. There's still a lot of nationalism, though. I mean, it's a very strong strain there, and in fact, some people are taking control of their neighborhoods or whole sectors of Baghdad——

The President. Yes, like the guy, the self-proclaimed mayor.

Mr. Brokaw. Right.

The President. This is all—a reasonable government will evolve. We just started. It wasn't but 2 weeks ago yesterday that the statue fell down. There have been 20-plus years of tyranny. And it's hard to believe that in 20 days democracy will emerge. But the point we're making is, is that the foundation for democracy is now being laid. And by the way, there's nothing wrong with nationalism within Iraq. People say the United States should leave, and we want to leave, as soon as we've accomplished our mission.

Timing of U.S. Withdrawal

Mr. Brokaw. How long will that take?

The President. Somebody asked me the other day, how long is it going to take to get rid of Saddam Hussein's regime? My answer is, as long as necessary.

Mr. Brokaw. But it may take as long as 2 years——

The President. It could. It could, or less. Who knows? But the point I'm making is, is that we are there to promote security, to

make sure life returns back to normal, and to help the Iraqi people establish a government, because we believe that democracy can work within Iraq. And nationalism, by the way, you know, means it's more likely that a government will evolve that is focused on Iraq, its traditions, and its history, as opposed to focusing on a particular religion.

Iran/Syria

Mr. Brokaw. Is Iran trying to take root in southern Iraq, in your judgment?

The President. Well, you know, you hear a lot of reports about the vacuums being filled by Iranian agents. We certainly hope that Iraq—Iran will allow Iraq to develop into a stable and peaceful society. We have sent the word to the Iranians that that's what we expect. I talk to Tony Blair and Jose Maria Aznar on a regular basis—talked to them yesterday—and this subject came up. And both of them have got contacts with the Iranian Government, and they will send the same message, similar to what we did to Syria, that we expect there to be cooperation and——

Mr. Brokaw. And if there is not, is Iran next?

The President. No, we just expect them to cooperate, and we will work with the world to encourage them to cooperate. We have no military plans. Just like I said about Syria. I mean, listen, the world, a lot of the—frankly, the left wing critics of our policy have said, "You know, these people are so militaristic, they're getting ready to invade Syria." That was the line of the day. We made it clear to the Syrians we expect them to cooperate.

Mr. Brokaw. And are they responding?

The President. Yes, I think they are. They're doing a better job. The borders look like they're tighter. As we find people that have escaped into Syria, we're giving the Syrian Government the names of the people, and they appear to want to be helpful.

United Nations

Mr. Brokaw. Let me ask you about the future of some other relationships that we have, with the United Nations, for example. There are two people who admire you very much and are powerful pundits in Washington. George Will and Bill Kristol have said of the U.N., George Will saying, "If it's not the end as we know it, it should be." And Bill Kristol has said, "The U.N. I used to think was just useless, now I think is harmful."

The President. Well, I would hope that the U.N. would be useful. I would hope that the U.N. would be an effective body at helping deal with the new threats of the 21st century, dealing with terror and terrorist states and proliferation of weapons.

And I can understand why some are frustrated with the United Nations, because the United Nations looked like it was not willing to join in the cause of freedom. And it was frustrating to Americans that it looked like the United Nations might hold up U.S. foreign policy that was being conducted in the name of peace and security.

On the other hand, I was the person that went to the United Nations in the first place. It was my decision to go give the speech on September 12, 2002, that called the United Nations to account. The United Nations will have a useful role in the reconstruction of Iraq, for example, because a lot of nations won't be able give reconstruction money without a U.N. conduit.

And there is a role in this case for the United Nations. I hope as threats emerge, the United Nations will be more responsive to those threats.

Visit by Australian Prime Minister John Howard

Mr. Brokaw. Are you going to invite French President Chirac to the ranch in Crawford?

The President. Well, my first guest will be John Howard—well, first guest from this moment forward will be John Howard, and he's coming——

Mr. Brokaw. The Prime Minister of Australia.

The President. The Prime Minister of Australia, he's a great friend and a wonderful ally, will be coming a week from Friday.

French President Jacques Chirac/NATO

Mr. Brokaw. Well, what about President Chirac, though?

The President. You really—you're really trying to get me to comment. I doubt he'll be coming to the ranch any time soon. On

the other hand, you know, there are some strains in the relationship, obviously, because of—it appeared to some in our administration and our country that the French position was anti-American. And my concern about the French position is it would weaken—the position they took could weaken the NATO Alliance. NATO is a very important alliance. It's something that we've not only worked to modernize—I've worked to expand NATO, and it's very important that Europe not become fractured to the point where the United States won't have relations with a united Europe whole, free, and at peace.

And hopefully, the past tensions will subside, and the French won't be using their position within Europe to create alliances against the United States or Britain or Spain or any of the new countries that are the new democracies in Europe.

Bush Doctrine

Mr. Brokaw. We've talked about this before. Now that the war in Iraq is effectively over, have you thought about a Bush doctrine that is a comprehensive structure of some kind, on a global basis, for dealing with weapons of mass destruction and the need, even, of preemptive strikes against rogue nations?

The President. Well, the Bush doctrine is actually being defined by action, as opposed to by words. Although, I think if you compile a lot of the speeches I've given, you could come up with the Bush doctrine.

The way I view the post-Saddam Iraq opportunities are these: one, that we can deal more effectively with weapons of mass destruction, that we made it clear that people who harbor weapons of mass destruction will be dealt with. Hopefully, most of it can be done diplomatically. And you'll see us—see me as well as members of my administration begin to push for new international protocols that will make international organizations more effective at stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

I also believe that reform in the Middle East as well as Middle East peace is an initiative that we will continue to—that I will push and push, particularly in the Middle East peace process. I will work hard to achieve the two-state solution. And we have a good opportunity to do so.

There are other parts of the Bush doctrine, if you want to call it that, that are equally important. One, the AIDS initiative in Africa is an incredibly important initiative, and I intend to call upon Europe, particularly the wealthier nations in Europe, to join us in providing the medicines, the anti-retroviral drugs, and the strategies necessary to start saving lives, more lives on the continent of Africa.

There's a lot of things where we can work together, is my point, to overcome any differences that might have existed on the Iraq policy.

Arab-U.S. Relations

Mr. Brokaw. Before the war began, we were told by any number of people in your administration that a lot of the leaders of the Middle East were privately saying, "We hope that you get rid of Saddam Hussein." But once the war was over, they did not go public with praise for the United States—Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, our best friends in that region. While on the Arab street, there continued to be very strong criticism to what we were doing.

The President. Yes, I can understand that. I mean, these guys—first of all, the thing that was important with those countries is they provided us help when we asked for help. We needed basing help in certain countries, and they provided it. That was one of the reasons why were successful against Saddam Hussein. We asked, and they delivered.

Part of the frustrations that exist in the Middle East—and I recognize this—is the fact that there is no movement toward peace with the Palestinians. Part of the frustration in the Middle East is also the fact that some of these governments need to enact reforms, and that's why both reform and working on the Middle Eastern peace will be priorities of mine.

Middle East Peace Process

Mr. Brokaw. Is the Middle East peace process going to accelerate greatly now that Arafat has accepted a Prime Minister? And has Arafat been removed effectively from the equation?

The President. I think it will accelerate and, hopefully, greatly. I'm not so sure what

that exactly means, but it will certainly accelerate from where we are today.

The selection of Abu Mazen as the Prime Minister is very positive, primarily because Abu Mazen has stated publicly that he is against terror and will use whatever powers he has to fight off the terrorist activities that have really prevented peace from moving forward.

In my June 24th speech I laid out——

Mr. Brokaw. Will you have him to the White House without Arafat, for example?

The President. I will one of these days, yes.

Mr. Brokaw. Without Arafat?

The President. Yes, absolutely. Listen, I always felt—first of all, I looked at the history of Mr. Arafat. Now, I saw what he did to President Clinton. There was no need to spend capital, unless you had an interlocutor who could deliver the Palestinian people toward peace. And I believe Abu Mazen is a man dedicated to peace, and I look forward to working with him for the two-state solution. My view is, is that the only way for there to be peace and for the survival of Israel and for the hope of the Palestinian people is for two states living side by side in peace. And I've laid out a plan to achieve that, a plan that calls upon actions by the Israelis, by the Palestinians, as well as by the Arab nations surrounding that troubled part of the world.

Military Speed and Flexibility/ David Bloom

Mr. Brokaw. There used to be an American doctrine about when we go to war it's overwhelming force. Now it's speed and flexibility, based on Iraq, and instant communication, not only behind the scenes, but everybody gets to look in on the battlefield.

The President. Well, the instant communications part was one of the reasons why I was comfortable in giving Tommy Franks and the commanders in the field the go-ahead to take the shot at Saddam Hussein on the first day. Because there in the Oval Office, we were getting near-instant feedback from eyes on the ground, what he was seeing, what he felt the conditions were like. It was an amazing moment to think that a person risking his life, viewing the farms, watching the entries, seeing, observing what was taking place inside one of Saddam's most guarded facilities, was able to pick up a device, call CENTCOM, and CENTCOM would call us in near real-time.

The ability to communicate has changed the nature of warfare. It allows for more interoperability, more ability for the Navy and the Air Force and the Special Ops and the Army and the Marines to work side by side in a coordinated basis, which makes it easier to fight a war with flexibility and speed and precision. So the doctrine really has changed.

As well, it's an amazing concept when you think about real-time TV focusing on war. And by the way, I express—Laura and I express our deepest sympathies to David Bloom's wife and his family. I knew him well during the campaign. He was a great journalist and really a good fellow, loved his family a lot. But you know, to think that David was there——

Mr. Brokaw. Rocketing across the desert.

The President. ——rocketing across the desert. It's an amazing feeling.

Mr. Brokaw. I don't want you to give up sources and methods, but the guy who called in the first time—still with us?

The President. Yes, he is. He is with us. Thank God. A brave soul.

Mr. Brokaw. That's great.

[*At this point, the first part of the interview concluded. After leaving Air Force One, the interview resumed at 2:45 p.m. in Lima, OH.*]

Economic Stimulus Plan

Mr. Brokaw. Listen, now that the war in Iraq is over, the whole country is turning its attention back to the economy, and there's—on the Hill, in your own party, there's a lot of skepticism about whether or not the tax cuts can get the job done. You started at $750 billion. You've now been talking about $550 billion. The Senate is talking about $350 billion. Would you take $350 billion?

The President. Well, I think it ought to be—actually, I think it ought to be more robust, and the reason why is because a lot of economists have told me that the tax cut needs to be sizeable enough to affect demand—job creation. And that's why I'm pushing what I'm pushing, and I'm not going

to quit pushing until they end up voting. I believe it's the right thing.

The American people need to know that last January I put out a job plan, and the Congress has been debating it, talking about it. And it was important in January. It's important now, and I expect them to get a good jobs bill out.

Mr. Brokaw. The Congressional Budget Office, however, says, you know, they've looked at it with three or four different models, and it's just going to be too small in terms of the impact on the overall economy.

The President. Well, I disagree with that. I would like—I would hope that they would argue the case on the floor of the Senate and the floor of the House, but the skeptics said it needs to be bigger. One of the things they also said was it's very important to hold the line on spending—that's another thing, that we accomplished something in the budget, discretionary spending is being held to about 4 percent. On the spending side, we've got restraint. We just need to make sure the package is robust enough to create new jobs so people can find work.

Mr. Brokaw. It's tough to come out here to Ohio, though. You've got a Republican Governor who went in at a very high number, and now he's down to around 42 percent in terms of approval rating. He's having to raise taxes, cut services. Wouldn't it be better to defer a little bit, get him off the hook? And these are important services that he's talking about. It's about Medicaid and——

The President. No, not at all. Actually, what's important is—and this is the reason to come to Ohio. It's a place where people are looking for work. And I feel so strongly that my job package will work, I'm willing to come to a place where people need work and say, let's get this done in the Congress. And this is the perfect place to bring a message of job creation, because there are people here that—in the manufacturing sector, in particular—that are looking for work.

Energy Policy

Mr. Brokaw. Mr. President, I've been struck by the fact that you now have the country's attention, and there's been almost no discussion about the need for conservation on energy and finding renewable sources and making that the highest of the high priorities. I think the country is ready to make a sacrifice, to do something.

The President. Well, actually, there's been a significant discussion about new sources of energy. I was the guy that stood in front of Congress and asked Congress to appropriate $1.2 billion to advance the hydrogen automobile. In other words—as well as ask Congress to appropriate monies to explore the opportunities for nuclear fusion.

And I believe that instead of getting mired in this talk about command and control and lawsuits and regulations, that we ought to use our technological capabilities to leapfrog the status quo and lead the world to a more energy efficient society.

Mr. Brokaw. But should we also assume that we can burn at the same rate that we have been? And you know, there's just no question about it, we've been on an energy consumption binge.

The President. Yes, that's right. And I think that that's why we need new technologies to help us go from one era, a hydrocarbon era, to a technologically driven era. And I believe we can get there. We've got energy for, you know, a decade or two, without the consumer suffering badly. But now is the time to move on new technologies. This is precisely the initiative I laid out for Congress.

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Mr. Brokaw. You're not going to get the Arctic Wildlife Refuge this time, though, do you think?

The President. Well, it's foolish not to, in my judgment. There's a lot of natural gas up there. And the reason we need natural gas here in America is so—places like California built a lot of electrical plants that run on natural gas. We've got to get it from somewhere, and I believe we can explore in the Arctic Wildlife in an environmentally sensitive way—and so do a lot of other people.

But it's become such a political issue. Washington, you know, is a town that—you know this better than me, I mean——

Mr. Brokaw. No, I don't know it better than you. You're in the cockpit. [*Laughter*]

The President. Well, you've been there longer than me. You're much older than I

am. [*Laughter*] But they take an issue and turn it into such high politics. Really, the Arctic Wildlife Refuge is a classic example of an issue that's been over-politicized, where the science never is allowed to emerge. We can drill for natural gas, which we need to do, in an environmentally safe way.

President's Spirituality and Decisionmaking

Mr. Brokaw. Let me ask you about the war and your attitudes about it. It's well known that you're a man of very strong faith. You have political and national security responsibilities as well. Was there a time when it was difficult to reconcile those two roles, your political and national security responsibility and your own spiritual obligation?

The President. Well, listen, any time you think about committing someone into combat is an emotional moment. You can't be detached from the human life involved with war. And I genuinely feel that the decision I made will make America more secure. And I felt like the risks of doing nothing, the risk of taking no action far exceeded the risks of combat, particularly since I knew our plan was geared toward minimizing life—minimizing loss of life—not only minimizing loss of life on our side but on the side of the innocent Iraqis.

I don't bring God into my life to be a political person. I ask God for strength and guidance. I ask God to help me be a better person. But the decision about war and peace was a decision I made based upon what I thought were the best interests of the American people. I was able to step back from religion, because I have a job to do. And I, on bended knee to the good Lord, asked Him to help me to do my job in a way that that's wise.

Casualties of War

Mr. Brokaw. I had a difficult moment on the air when the mother of a marine who got killed called in and wanted to talk about her son and said, "You know, I like what the networks are doing, but all those graphics and all that fancy coverage, for those of us who are out here with children in harm's way, it's murderous, Mr. Brokaw." And it put it all in perspective. Did you have a moment like that?

The President. Oh, I think, yes, maybe about the day the prisoners, the people took the wrong turn, the kids, the cooks, and the people like that from El Paso, Fort Bliss, went the wrong way. That was a tough day. And it's got to be—listen, I went down to Camp Lejeune and met with family of—who've lost their lives. I met a young lieutenant's wife with a young baby, and it's tough.

The amazing thing is, of course—I shouldn't say "of course"—but the amazing thing about meeting those people is they gave me great strength. They were proud of their loved ones' sacrifice. They understood why we were there, and they were strong, really strong.

Mr. Brokaw. There was a young marine who was killed, whose father in Baltimore held up his picture and said, "I want the President to see this. It's my only son, and I want the President to see this picture."

He was opposed to the war. Did you see it?

The President. No, I didn't see that, but I'm sure I can understand why a dad would feel that way. I would feel the same way if I were a dad about how miserable I felt if I lost my son.

Politics of War

Mr. Brokaw. Can you imagine being FDR and running World War II all those years—Truman, Korea? All the years that Vietnam went on and 57,000 lives were lost.

The President. I know.

Mr. Brokaw. Now that you've had your own——

The President. One month.

Mr. Brokaw. ——one month, but your own time on the crucible, to know what the country would go through?

The President. It's a very interesting question, because—yes, I know, I can't imagine what it would be like to have been through the Vietnam war as the President of the United States. I hope I would have done it differently. I hope I would have had a clearer mission and given the militaries the tools and their strategy necessary to achieve a mission, as opposed to politicizing the war

the way they did. But you're right, it's a strain on the country.

On the other hand, the coverage was a little different.

Mr. Brokaw. It was.

The President. The perpetual moves 24 hours a day.

Mr. Brokaw. And part of that was, by the way, that it became very emotional very quickly. One of the things that you said was that you wanted to liberate the Iraqi people so they could speak their minds. But in this country, when some people spoke their minds and it happened to be in opposition of the war, they got jumped on by a lot of folks.

The President. Oh, I don't think so.

Mr. Brokaw. Well, the Dixie Chicks, for example. Would you have them come to the White House?

The President. I mean, the Dixie Chicks are free to speak their mind. They can say what they want to say. And just because—they shouldn't have their feelings hurt just because some people don't want to buy their records when they speak out. You know, freedom is a two-way street. But I have—don't really care what the Dixie Chicks said. I want to do what I think is right for the American people, and if some singers or Hollywood stars feel like speaking out, that's fine. That's the great thing about America. It stands in stark contrast to Iraq, by the way.

First Lady's Role

Mr. Brokaw. What did you and Laura talk about at the end of the day? During Usama bin Laden, she was counseling you on your language—[*laughter*]—saying——

The President. It wasn't so every day. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Brokaw. ——"Georgie, you don't have to say, wanted dead or alive."

The President. Well, she counsels me on a lot of things. Most of the time it's—but who's going to listen. She understood all along why I was making decisions I was making. She understood the threat that Iraq posed. She understood that Iraq was a part of the war on terror. And she doesn't—she's like a lot of people; she was nervous about war.

Former President Bush

Mr. Brokaw. So was your dad, by the way.

The President. I'm sure he was. Nobody likes wars.

Mr. Brokaw. Did your dad talk to you every day?

The President. No. I check in with him on occasion, but now we don't talk every day.

Mr. Brokaw. How about Barbara? What does she have to say, your mother?

The President. She's as feisty as ever. She's doing well. She doesn't follow everything in the news and the opinion like Dad does. He's an every-word man.

Mr. Brokaw. Do you seek his counsel? It's a little tricky. Here's your father, somebody that you revered and love, and he's been there before. But at the same time, you're now the President. How do you work that out?

The President. Well, I really don't spend a lot of time hashing over policy with him. He knows that I am much better informed than he could possibly be. He gives me—our relationship is more of—and our conversations are more along the line of a dad and a son, a dad conveying to his son how much he loves him, which is important. Even at the age of 56 years old, it's important.

Toppling the Baghdad Statue

Mr. Brokaw. Did you call him the day the statue came down of Saddam Hussein?

The President. I can't remember.

Mr. Brokaw. Because that was a memorable day.

The President. It was. It was.

Mr. Brokaw. Did you watch all that?

The President. I watched some of it. As you know, I've got a schedule to keep. I don't have time to sit around watching TV all day long. But somebody—I think the—Ashley or Blake said, the statue, they're about to get it down. They had a guy hammering on it for a while, and I watched the hammering——

Mr. Brokaw. It took a while to pull it down.

The President. I watched them hammer. And then they said, "They're hooking it up, and they've got the crane out there." And I said, "Well, let me know." They said, "Well,

it's about to come down." So I hustled and then watched it.

Iraqi Information Minister

Mr. Brokaw. What about the Iraqi information minister, who to the very end—[*laughter*]——

The President. He's my man. He was great. [*Laughter*] Somebody accused us of hiring him and putting him there. He was a classic.

Mr. Brokaw. Al-Sahhaf.

The President. Al-Sahhaf.

Mr. Brokaw. He said, "We are repulsing them at the airport. This war is just about over." [*Laughter*]

The President. He was great. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Brokaw. Did you watch him actually? [*Laughter*]

The President. I did watch some of his clips. You know, a lot of the stuff I get, people come in and report to me—did you hear what so-and-so said, or, did you see that? So I get a lot of things secondhand.

But in the case of the statue or Sahhaf, somebody would say, "He's getting ready to speak," and I'd pop out of a meeting or turn and watch the TV.

Saddam Hussein

Mr. Brokaw. And did they tell you when Saddam made those bizarre video appearances very late in the war, when he was said to be walking around the neighborhood——

The President. Yes, I saw some of that. Like, Condi will come in and say—I'll pick up the phone; I've got direct link now—I'll say, "Well, Condi, what is this business about, what does the Agency say about this latest videotape?" She'll pop in and say, "You know, I talked to Tenet, and Tenet says our analysts can't imagine that the guy could possibly be alive, walking around Baghdad the same day the statue came down."

You know, as I told you, we had some evidence early on that strikes from the first day may have gotten him. I say "may" because we don't have the DNA in hand to prove, and people really don't want to be in a position, Tom, where you make—broadcasting success and then all of a sudden Saddam Hussein shows up somewhere. According to this one eyewitness, he's not going to show up anywhere.

Al Qaida and North Korea

Mr. Brokaw. Final question. You still have two big issues out there on the horizon, Al Qaida and North Korea. North Korea today saying that it's reprocessed 8,000 plutonium rods, and if you don't start talking to them, they're willing to sell them.

The President. Yes. See, they're back to the old blackmail game. One of our goals and objectives must be to strengthen the nonproliferation regimes and get the whole world focused on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or the materials for weapons of mass destruction. And North Korea is making my case that we've got to come together.

And we started that process in the North Korean Peninsula that is coming together. The Chinese now, for the first time, are partners at the table. I look forward to hearing what the Chinese say about being rebuffed by the North Koreans because they, too, believe that the Peninsula ought to be nuclear-weapons-free. This will give us an opportunity to say to the North Koreans and the world, we're not going to be threatened. On the other hand we, the world, must come together to make sure institutions like the IAEA are effective at stopping proliferation.

It's another reason, by the way, for us to also advance the missile defense systems, because the missile defense system will make it less likely that a nuclear country could blackmail us or Japan or any one of our friends.

Mr. Brokaw. And Al Qaida?

The President. Yes, we're on the hunt on Al Qaida.

Mr. Brokaw. Has it diminished 50 percent, 70 percent?

The President. I can't give you a number, but it's certainly diminished. And Khalid Sheik Mohammed's arrest, right before the Iraqi war, was a blow to the Al Qaida network. They're still moving around. And we're watching. And we're moving. We're cutting off money. There are some parts of Afghanistan where we think some are hiding, and we've got—we're on their trail.

The other day, for example, in the Situation Room, we had Tommy up, and he gave us a briefing on Iraq. He's the CENTCOM commander, as you know, also responsible for Afghanistan, and then the general in place in Afghanistan came up. So we split the briefing between Iraq and Afghanistan. And it was an important briefing because he was telling us troop strength and troop strategies as well as how well the country is beginning to get on its feet.

But the point I'm trying to make is, is that we are constantly moving against Al Qaida in Afghanistan as we speak or as we conduct the Iraq theater.

Mr. Brokaw. Mr. President, thank you very much for your time today. We really appreciate it.

The President. I enjoyed it.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 11:14 a.m. aboard Air Force One for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to former President Saddam Hussein and former Information Minister Muhammad Said Kazim al-Sahhaf of Iraq; Prime Minister Tony Blair of the United Kingdom; President Jose Maria Aznar of Spain; former National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft; journalists George Will and Bill Kristol; Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and Chairman Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian Authority; NBC journalist David Bloom, who died of natural causes in Operation Iraqi Freedom; country music group the Dixie Chicks; Usama bin Laden, leader of the Al Qaida terrorist organization; and Khalid Sheik Muhammed, senior Al Qaida leader responsible for planning the September 11 attack, who was captured in Pakistan on March 1. A portion of this interview could not be verified because the tape was incomplete.

Message on the Observance of Armenian Remembrance Day, 2003

April 24, 2003

Today marks the anniversary of a horrible tragedy, the mass killings and forced exile of countless Armenians in the final days of the Ottoman Empire. Many Armenians refer to these appalling events as the "great calamity," reflecting a deep sorrow that continues to haunt them and their neighbors, the Turkish people. The suffering that befell the Armenian people in 1915 is a tragedy for all humanity, which the world should not forget. I join the Armenian-American community and Armenians around the world in mourning the horrendous loss of life.

I also salute our wise and bold friends from Armenia and Turkey who are coming together in a spirit of reconciliation to consider these events and their significance. I applaud them for rising above bitterness, and taking action to create a better future. I wish them success, building on their recent and significant achievements, as they work together in a spirit of hope and understanding.

As we remember those who perished and suffered, we salute the nation of Armenia, and Armenians everywhere. The United States is grateful for the contributions of Armenian Americans to our national life. Generations of Armenians have employed wisdom, courage, and centuries-old traditions to overcome great suffering and enrich their adopted American homeland.

The United States is proud to be a friend of Armenia, a young state with an ancient heritage. We are deepening our partnership to help achieve a secure, prosperous, and dignified future for the citizens of Armenia. The United States is committed to achieving a just and lasting settlement to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. We will also continue to help Armenia as it strives to strengthen its democracy and market economy.

On behalf of the American people, I send solemn wishes to the Armenian people on this day of remembrance. Our nations stand together, determined to create a future of peace, prosperity, and freedom for the citizens of our countries, for our regions, and for the world.

George W. Bush

NOTE: An original was not available for verification of the content of this message.