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George W. Bush

White House Oval Office

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020925-1.html>

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you. Welcome. Here's what we're going to do. I am going to give a statement, President Uribe will give a statement. I will call upon an American journalist, the President will call upon a Colombian journalist. I will then call upon another American journalist, the President will call upon a Colombian journalist. And then you all will leave. (Laughter.)

Mr. President, welcome to the Oval Office. It is my honor to welcome this good man, this friend of freedom to the Oval Office. I have been incredibly impressed by his vision for a peaceful Colombia and a prosperous Colombia. He's a man who told the people of his country that he would work to eradicate terrorism, narco-trafficking. The Colombian people believe him, and so do I.

And today I want to affirm our country's strong desire to help the Colombian government and the Colombian people prosper and to live in freedom. I appreciate his leadership. I appreciate his strength of character. I appreciate his clear vision.

So, Mr. President, bienvenidos a la Oval Office, aqui en la Casa Blanca.

PRESIDENT URIBE: Muchas gracias, Presidente. (continues to speak in Spanish.)

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you, sir.

Would you like that translated into English?

PRESIDENT URIBE: Thank you, Mr. President, for this warm welcome. We needed the support of your country, the support of your government, your personal support for my country to solve problems of violence, economic and social problems. You have set up a very effective example of the way we need to go on to fight and to defeat terrorism. We are, in necessity, to have allies such as you and your government for Colombians to restore law and order, for Colombians to restore a way of creating employment, of improvement of our standard of living.

Thank you, Mr. President.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Por nada. (Laughter.)

Patsy Wilson, Reuters.

Q Mr. President, do you believe that Saddam Hussein is a bigger threat to the United States than al Qaeda?

PRESIDENT BUSH: That's a -- that is an interesting question. I'm trying to think of something humorous to say. (Laughter.) But I can't when I think about al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. They're both risks, they're both dangerous. The difference, of course, is that al Qaeda likes to hijack governments. Saddam Hussein is a dictator of a government. Al Qaeda hides, Saddam doesn't, but the danger is, is that they work in concert. The danger is, is that al Qaeda becomes an extension of Saddam's madness and his hatred and his capacity to extend weapons of mass destruction around the world.

Both of them need to be dealt with. The war on terror, you can't distinguish between al Qaeda and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror. And so it's a comparison that is -- I can't make because I can't distinguish between the two, because they're both equally as bad, and equally as evil, and equally as destructive.

MR. FLEISCHER: Question for a Colombian reporter?

Q Mr. President Bush, the Colombian government is here asking for support from the U.S. government, economic support, both with the Andean Trade Preference Act and also maybe from the Department of Treasury. Is the government, the U.S. government willing to help the Colombian government?

PRESIDENT BUSH: We're certainly willing to help the government and the Colombian people realize a prosperous future. I've asked my Secretary of Treasury to be here today to listen to the dialogue with the President. There will be further discussions. The Andean Trade Preference Act has been renewed and revitalized to the benefit of the Colombian economy.

We had a big discussion here in America, and I got a favorable vote out of our Congress that I'm confident will benefit those who seek work in Colombia. We look forward to working with international institutions to help this good man and this good -- important country to grow and prosper.

And so the purpose of this visit is to not only talk about prosperity and economic growth and vitality, but it's also to talk about how to fight terror. And I'm looking forward to a good and active discussion.

Terry Moran.

Q Mr. President, are you politicizing the war? Do you think Americans should base their vote in November in part on where a candidate stands on the war?

PRESIDENT BUSH: I think the American people ought to understand that life has changed here in this country; that it used to be two oceans would separate us from danger, that we were quite comfortable in our shores knowing that it would take an unusual circumstance to be attacked. After September the 11th, we were attacked, and the American people understand that this country must deal with the true threats.

I am as determined today as I was on September the 11th to pursue an enemy which still wants to hurt America. I am absolutely determined to make sure that 10 years from now we don't look back and say, what happened, why did America go soft, why did we ignore true threats that face our people?

And I hope the American people understand that. I was concerned, of course, after September the 11th, that as time went by, some might forget, some might forget the true threats. Of course, I'm reminded of that every day when I come here to the Oval Office that we face true threats. And, Terry, my job is to protect the American people. It's my most important job, most important assignment I have. And I will continue to do that, regardless of the season.

Q So it's a legitimate political issue?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Legitimate national security concern is what it is. You may try to politicize it. I view it as my main obligation; that is to protect the American people. It's the most important job this President will have, and it's the most important job future Presidents will have, because the nature of war has changed. We're vulnerable. And, therefore, I expect -- the American people should expect me, and any President, to do everything we can to protect the homeland. And I will, I'll do that.

Q Mr. President, a question for both. What are your reactions on the U.S. extradition request of Colombian paramilitary leader Carlos Costano? And if you would also answer, Colombia sent you a letter yesterday saying that there's no need to sign a bilateral agreement with the U.S. in terms of the ICC that you are seeking to sign with all other countries in the world. Do you think -- do you still like a bilateral agreement with Colombia and those --

PRESIDENT BUSH: Yes, we want an Article 98 with all countries, absolutely. I strongly reject the ICC. I'm not going to accept an ICC. I'm not going to put ourselves in a position where our soldiers and diplomats get hauled into a court over which we have got -- the prosecutors whom we don't know, the judges -- I mean, we're not going to allow ourselves to do that. And our friends shouldn't want us to be put in that position. Therefore, we're seeking Article 98s from our friends.

And we will hold people to account. If they're a terrorist, we're going to hold them to account. So the guy who got indicted yesterday made a decision to be a terrorist; we made a decision to hold him to account. And we will continue to do that. We believe that's part of our responsibility as freedom-loving people.

And I look forward to working with President Uribe to hold others to account, if they continue to terrorize the world. And terrorism -- terrorists attacked our country and hurt us. If they attack Colombia and hurt them, they're still equally as guilty, as far as we're concerned. It doesn't matter who the victim is. What matters is whether or not they're practicing terrorist activities.

And we will continue to fight terror. It's our obligation, our duty. History has called us into action.

Thank you all.