



THE WHITE HOUSE

PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH

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President Welcomes Afghan President Karzai to the White House

The East Room

11:03 A.M. EDT

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you. Welcome. Mr. President, welcome back to the White House. I am honored to stand by the first democratically-elected leader in the five-thousand year history of Afghanistan. Congratulations.

PRESIDENT KARZAI: Thank you, sir. Thank you very much.

PRESIDENT BUSH: I want to thank you for your friendship and your commitment to freedom. I especially want to thank you for being such a wonderful host to my wife, Laura. She came back overwhelmed by the experience, touched by the people she met, and optimistic about the future for your country. So thanks for being a good host and thanks for being such a fine inspiration to not only the people of your country, but showing the countries in your neighborhood what's possible.

Your leadership has been strong, and it's in our interests that Afghanistan be free. Afghanistan is no longer a safe haven for terrorists. Afghanistan is a key partner in the global war on terror. Our troops have fought and will continue to fight side-by-side to defeat the few who want to stop the ambitions of the many.

PRESIDENT KARZAI: Exactly.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Increasing numbers of low-level Taliban are getting the message that Afghanistan society is peaceful and optimistic, and I appreciate your efforts to reach out to the low-level members of the Taliban. I am impressed by the progress that you're making toward a market economy and a full-fledged democracy. One of the things that's very important, that is, a shift of opinion is taking place where now women are equal partners in society; over 40 percent of the voters in that October day were women voters; girls are now going to school; women entrepreneurs are opening businesses. The President was telling me that there's quite a number of candidates who filed for the upcoming legislative elections who are women. The model, the example being set by Afghanistan in that part of the world is an important -- important message, because you can't have a free and hopeful society unless women are full participants in the society.

And so Mr. President, thank you for your leadership. We're looking forward to watching and helping make sure these elections go forward in a peaceful -- peaceful manner. It's a -- the number of candidates that -- who have filed are -- is quite impressive. I think you maybe told me over 5,000?



PRESIDENT KARZAI: Over 5,000.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Yes, 5,000 people have filed for office. It's a -- it's a -- democracy is -- democracy is flourishing.

We spent a lot of time talking about the challenges we continue to face. Our objective is to continue to train the Afghan army so that they're capable of defeating the terrorists. However, today, it's important for the Afghan people to understand that we have a strategic vision about our relationship with Afghanistan.

I've signed a strategic partnership with the President. It's a partnership that we've been working on for quite awhile. It's a partnership that establishes regular high-level exchanges on political security and economic interests of -- economic issues of mutual interests. We will consult with Afghanistan if it perceives its territorial integrity, independence or security is at risk. We will help the Afghan people build strong, lasting government and civic institutions. We'll continue to support reconstruction, economic development and investments that will help educate and build the skills of the Afghan people.

I've got great faith in the future in Afghanistan. First, I've got great faith in the ability of democracy to provide hope. And I've got faith in this man as a leader. He has shown tremendous courage in the face of difficult odds. He's been a strong leader, he's a good friend to our country, and, Mr. President, it's my honor to welcome you back here. Congratulations.



PRESIDENT KARZAI: Thank you very much. My turn?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Your turn. (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT KARZAI: Mr. President --

PRESIDENT BUSH: Don't give these an opening, they'll jump in there at a moment's notice. (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT KARZAI: Mr. President, it's a great pleasure and privilege to be visiting the United States again, to be visiting you in the White House with the usual warmth and hospitality. I was in Boston yesterday, meeting with all the students on their commencement day. I was given an honorary degree, which was a great honor for me, and received tremendous warmth there, as well.

The United States has been the country with whose help we have rebuilt our country, are in the process of rebuilding our country. And you have been at the forefront of that effort with us in Afghanistan and in the rest of the world. I'm here today to thank you, Mr. President, once again for your leadership in providing Afghanistan the security, the reconstruction, and the freedoms that the Afghan people have today.

You cannot imagine, Mr. President, and I cannot tell you that in a few words -- there are so many words, it has to take a much longer time for me to describe to you what Afghanistan was going through three years ago. So it's difficult to say, and I'm sometimes -- rather often -- neither our press, nor your press, nor the press in the rest of the world will pick up the miseries of the Afghans three years ago and what has been achieved since then, until today. We have a constitution; we had a presidential election -- and I'm glad it turned out to be good for me. (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT BUSH: I know how you feel. (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT KARZAI: Yes, well -- (laughter.) I believe we share that feeling, yes. And we are going to have a parliamentary election in three months' time. And I just informed the President that we have, as of yesterday -- as of the day before yesterday, over 5,000 candidates for the national assembly and for the provincial assemblies. There are women from all the provinces of the country will be coming to the parliament. So the country is moving forward.



We have been talking with your officials in Afghanistan and have conveyed to you through your embassy and government the desire of the Afghan people to have a strategic partnership with America, because after the completion of the parliamentary elections, the Bonn process will come to an end. From that point onward, we would like the world to recognize that with the completion of the Bonn process and the arrival of the Afghan parliament, Afghanistan will not suddenly stand on its own feet. Politically, we will have done the process -- politically, we will have completed the process, but in terms of the institutional strength, Afghanistan will continue to need a lot of support.

And I'm glad that you signed with me today a memorandum of understanding on the long-term partnership between Afghanistan and the United States of America, which will make sure that Afghanistan continues to receive reconstruction assistance, which will make sure that Afghanistan continues to receive training from the U.S. for its military and the police, and which will enable Afghanistan to stand on its own feet eventually and be a good, active member of the region, contributing to peace and stability in the region, and be a bridge between various parts of that part of the world for trade and values.

Mr. President, I'm here today to thank you for all that you have done for Afghanistan. And we are very, very happy. We are grateful. You sent the Vice President of the United States to come and attend the inauguration in Afghanistan. It was a tremendous honor for us to receive him there, to have him there. It was the manifestation of the commitment of the United States and yourself to the Afghan people to have that day attended by the Vice President. And we are very, very happy more importantly to have had the First Lady to visit us in Afghanistan. We were thrilled. The Afghan women were thrilled. The Afghan site were thrilled. And now you guess whose turn it is now to come to Afghanistan. (Laughter.) So we'll be hoping to receive you there very soon.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you for the invitation. (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT KARZAI: The country is much greener than it was in the past few years. I thank you once again for receiving us here and for the support you've given to us all along, and will continue to do so. Thank you.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you, Mr. President. Of course, I don't want to correct my friend, but I must. In thanking me, you're really thanking the American people.



PRESIDENT KARZAI: Of course.

PRESIDENT BUSH: And the American people are most impressed by the progress you've made, Mr. President, and it's progress that we look forward to working with you so that you can continue to make progress. And in the spirit of free press, we'll answer a couple of questions.

PRESIDENT KARZAI: Yes, we all know that, yes. (Laughter.)

PRESIDENT BUSH: Hunt.

Q Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, will you give the Karzai government custody of Afghan citizens detained by the United States? And are you willing to give Afghanistan more say in U.S. military matters in their country?

And to President Karzai, did you discuss the prisoner abuse at Bagram issue with the President?

PRESIDENT BUSH: First, in terms of more say over our military, our relationship is one of cooperate and consult. Of course our troops will respond to U.S. commanders, but our U.S. commanders and our diplomatic mission there is in a consultative relationship with the government. It's a free society. There is a democratically-elected government. They've invited us in, and we'll consult with them in terms of how to achieve mutual goals, and that is to rout out the remnants of al Qaeda, to deal with those folks who would come and like to create harm to U.S. citizens and/or Afghan citizens.

I must say, the Afghan military is making great progress. It hadn't been all that long ago that we started a training mission. Now there's over 25,000 troops who are trained and ready to fight, and they take the fight to these thugs that are coming across the border to create havoc. And we've got another, I think, 22,000 to train to get this army fully stood up. Our mission in Afghanistan and Iraq is the same. I mean, we want these new democracies to be able to defend themselves. And so we will continue to work with the Afghans to train them and to cooperate and consult with the government.

The other aspect of the question?

Q The prisoners who --

PRESIDENT BUSH: Oh, the prisoners, yes. Our policy, as you know, has been to work our way through those who are being held in Guantanamo and send them back to the host countries, and we will do so over time, with the Afghan government. Part of the issue is to make sure there is a place where the prisoners can be held. As I explained to the President, that our policy is one where we want the people to be sent home, but, two, we've got to make sure the facilities are there -- facilities where these people can be housed and fed and guarded.

Now, you asked about the prison -- yes, he did bring up the prison abuse.

PRESIDENT KARZAI: On the question of the prisoner abuse, we are, of course, sad about that. But let me make sure that you all know that that does not reflect on the American people.

Right now in Afghanistan there is an Italian lady that has been kidnapped by an Afghan man -- while there are hundreds of Afghan women demonstrating outside in the streets of Kabul demanding the release of that woman, the Italian lady. So the prisoner abuse thing is not at all a thing that we attribute to anybody else but those individuals. The Afghan people are grateful, very, very much to the American people. They recognize that individual acts do not reflect either on governments or on societies. These things happen everywhere. As we are sad, we recognize that the American people, kind as they are to

Afghanistan, have nothing to do with that.

And I'm glad to tell you that I was reading today somewhere that one of those persons has been given a sentence of prison for three months and removed from his job, and that's a good thing. We -- I must repeat strongly -- are fully aware of the tremendously good values of the American people and of their kind attitude toward us and others in this world.

Thank you.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Somebody from the Afghan press?

PRESIDENT KARZAI: Anybody from the Afghan press? Do we have an Afghan press? Oh, here he is. (Laughter.)

Q (As translated.) This question is for President Bush, question was: Besides security and military assistance, Afghanistan needs more economic assistance. How can the U.S. assist more in building the economic infrastructure of Afghanistan?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Right. As you know, we cooperated early with Japan and Saudi Arabia in helping them build a very important highway. I can remember when then-Secretary of State Powell came in and asked whether or not I thought this made sense, and I did. And I talked -- I think I talked to you about it in our first visit.

PRESIDENT KARZAI: Yes, yes.

PRESIDENT BUSH: I hope that highway is complete -- if not, being completed.

PRESIDENT KARZAI: It is --

PRESIDENT BUSH: We talked today about electricity. Interestingly enough, Afghanistan has got natural gas resources, and that those gas resources can be used to fire electricity plants which will be helpful for the infrastructure. And as a matter of fact, thanks to the United States Congress, there is reconstruction money in the supplemental and the budget. And that's good. And so those are ways we can help.

The truth of the matter -- another way we can help is to diversify the agricultural sector, which leads to a subject that we spent some time on, and that is opium and poppies. As you know, there are -- there's too much poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. And I made it very clear to the President that this is -- that we have got to work together to eradicate poppy crop. And the President, not only in this meeting but in other meetings, has been very forthcoming about the desire to eradicate poppy. And as a matter of fact, according to a United Nations' report, there is less poppy today than the previous year.

PRESIDENT KARZAI: Exactly.

PRESIDENT BUSH: The President can give you some statistics on that if you're interested. One of the interesting issues, however, besides poppy crop eradication, and frankly, bringing people to justice who are running drugs is to -- is for crop substitution. And the -- President Karzai was talking about how the quality of the pomegranate that used to be grown in Afghanistan, evidently it's quite famous for -- the country is quite famous for growing pomegranates.

PRESIDENT KARZAI: Yes, yes.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Or honeydew melons. In other words, there are some specialty crops, along with wheat and corn, that can and should be grown in Afghanistan. We look forward to working -- the President brought his Agricultural Minister with him, and we look forward to working on this aspect of economic development. After all, Afghanistan has had a long history of farming. And we can do -- we can do a lot to help the farmers get back on their feet and diversify away from poppies.

And so there are some areas where we discussed help. The truth of the matter is, though, that it's very important for your government to make -- continue to make -- and I'm confident the President will -- but continue to make the right decisions about rule of law and transparency and decisions that will encourage an open marketplace so that people will feel comfortable investing in your country.

I don't know if you want to comment on that -- on the poppy issue.

PRESIDENT KARZAI: On the drugs issue, yes, yes. Mr. President, indeed, Afghanistan is suffering from the cultivation of poppies, which is undermining our economy. It's giving us a bad name, worst of all. Just after the inauguration, a day after

the Vice President and Secretary Rumsfeld left Afghanistan for the U.S., we called a meeting of the Afghan elders and representatives and spoke to them about the curse of poppies in Afghanistan. Their response to that was very positive. A lot of provinces that were the biggest producers of poppy refrained from producing poppies. Three years ago I saw a report in the press that the province of Nangarhar, which used to produce poppies, has now reduced poppies by 80 percent. The same as in Helmand, the same as in Badakhshan, the same as in other areas where poppies were grown.

So we are hoping that Afghanistan this year will have something between 20 to 30 percent reduction in poppies all over the country, and that is a lot. When I was addressing the Afghan people a few months ago, I was not expecting the response to be so positive, or that we will have poppy reduction by so many percentages in a year. Now if this trend continues, we'll have no poppies, hopefully, in Afghanistan in another five or six years.

But equally important is the provision of alternative livelihoods to the Afghan people. The President mentioned pomegranates, honeydew melon, lots of other things in Afghanistan that people destroyed in order to replace with poppies have to be now brought back to the lives of the Afghan farmers' alternative livelihood. And our adjudication to the arrest of drug dealers, mafia, the producers of the labs, is going on. But this trend -- and with proper alternative livelihood, hopefully in five to six years, Afghanistan should be free of poppies. That's a promise we have given to the world and to the Afghan people, and that's a promise that we will deliver on. Hold us accountable on that.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you, sir.

Steve.

Q Mr. President, on judicial nominees, are you willing to risk a stalling of your domestic agenda in order to get votes on judicial nominees? And what do you say to critics who said Republicans did basically the same thing to some of President Clinton's nominees?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Steve, I have made my position very clear, and that is my job is to pick people who will interpret the Constitution, not use the bench from which to write law. That's what I campaigned

on. I said, if I'm the President, I will pick people who do that. I said, I'll pick people who are -- will bring great credit to the bench. And that's exactly what I've done, consistent with judicial philosophy in my picks, as well as the character of the people I pick. And I expect them to get an up or down vote. That's what I expect. And I think the American people expect that, as well. People ought to have a fair hearing and they ought to get an up or down vote on the floor.

Why don't you go with one final question. We've got this lady reporter here. Yes.

PRESIDENT KARZAI: All right. Lady.

Q Just to follow up on the treatment of the prisoners. Mr. President, you know, anti-American feeling is running high in the Muslim world. We've seen it in Afghanistan after the alleged disintegration of the Koran in Guantanamo. After meeting with the President, how do you assure the Muslim world and Afghan people that have seen death as a result of the article, that this incident in Bagram and other treatment of prisoners is isolated incident, and it's not systemic?

And if I may ask you, Mr. President, as you know, the casualties of Iraq is again high today -- 50 more people dying. Do you think that insurgence is getting harder now to defeat militarily? Thank you.

PRESIDENT BUSH: No, I don't think so. I think they're being defeated. And that's why they continue to fight. The worst thing for them is to see democracy. The President can speak to that firsthand. The worst problem that an ideologue that uses terror to try to get their way is to see a free society emerge. And I'm confident we're making great progress in Iraq.

And clearly, it's dangerous and we mourn the loss of life. On the other hand, the eight-and-a-half million Iraqis who went to the polls sent a very clear message to the world, that they want to be free.

PRESIDENT KARZAI: Ma'am, yes, we discussed those questions on the -- on the demonstrations, or the so-called demonstrations in part of the -- parts of Afghanistan. You saw that government buildings were burned and private property was damaged, broken. Those demonstrations were, in reality, not related to the Newsweek story. They were more against the elections in Afghanistan; they were more against the progress in Afghanistan; they were more against the strategic partnership with the United States.

We know who did it. We know the guys. We know the people behind those demonstrations. And if -- unfortunately, you don't hear -- follow the Afghan press, but if you listen to the Voice of America, the Radio Liberty, and the BBC, the Afghan population condemned that -- those acts of arson in Afghanistan.

Of course, we are as Muslims very much unhappy with Newsweek bringing a matter so serious in the gossip column. It's really something that one shouldn't do, that responsible journalism shouldn't do at all. But Newsweek story is not America's story. That's what -- that's what we understand in Afghanistan. America has over a thousand mosques. I have gone and prayed in mosques here in America; I've prayed in Virginia; I've gone and prayed in Maryland; I've been to a mosque in Washington. And thousands of Afghans have been to mosques here in town, and as a matter of fact, tens of thousands of Muslims are going on a daily basis to mosques in America and praying.

So -- and this is what was also reflected in Afghanistan. People spoke in the mosques -- the clergy, and said, what the hell are you doing? There is -- there is a respect, there is this freedom in America for religion, and there are Muslims, on a daily basis praying in mosques in America. And there are Korans,

Holy Korans all over America in homes and mosques. So it was a political act -- a political act against Afghanistan's stability, which we have condemned, which the Afghan people have condemned.

On the issue of prisoners, I spoke earlier, it does not reflect at all on American people. On the contrary, it's an individual act just like that bad Afghan kidnapped an Italian lady. And it's not the work of the Afghan people -- in the same way, we treat this case.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you, Mr. President. Thank you.

PRESIDENT KARZAI: All right, okay, thanks very much. Bye-bye.

END 11:28 A.M. EDT