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Dr. Rice Briefs Press on President's Trip to NATO Summit

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

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DR. RICE: I'm going to open with a brief overview of the President's upcoming trip to Europe for the NATO summit and for other meetings, and then I'll be happy to take your questions.

There are three major items on the agenda at the NATO summit in Prague. First, NATO will, for the second time since the end of the Cold War, welcome new members. This is an historic event for Europe and for the Transatlantic Alliance, as Europe continues to move closer to realizing the vision of a continent that is whole, free, and at peace.

President Bush has long maintained America's commitment to a strong NATO alliance and to a robust expansion of NATO, a point that he made dramatically in his speech at Warsaw when he said that the Alliance should do as much as possible, not as little. And I think you will see that at the NATO summit that charge has been taken up.

Second, NATO members will work to advance the task of transforming NATO. The end of the Cold War has meant the end of the Cold War threat of massive armies contending for the Central European plains. And all NATO members today face common threats from terrorists and the states that sponsor them. These threats require a different kind of military force to defend against, a force that is lighter, more agile, and more flexible. NATO members are working to transform their forces to meet new threats and to increase the ability of our forces to work together.

Third, we will make further progress in building a new relationship with Russia. This summit and this round of expansion will be further evidence of America's and Europe's new strategic relationship with Russia, which is formalized in agreements such as the Moscow Treaty and the NATO-Russia Council. An alliance founded to wage the Cold War will once again show how far it has come since that task was completed.

The President and Mrs. Bush will depart Washington on Tuesday morning, arriving in Prague that evening. On Wednesday, the President will hold five bilateral meetings with Czech President Havel, Czech Prime Minister Spidla, with President Sezer of Turkey, President Chirac of France, and NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson. At each of the meetings the President will discuss NATO issues, Iraq, the war on terrorism, and bilateral matters.

Later that afternoon, the President will deliver remarks at the Prague Atlantic Students Summit, where he will discuss his vision of a Europe whole, free and at peace.

On Thursday, the President will attend several working sessions of the NATO summit, and an announcement of the countries to be invited into NATO will be made on Thursday.

On Friday, the President travels to St. Petersburg, Russia, where he will meet with President Putin. The two Presidents will discuss a host of issues, including Russia's emerging relationship with NATO.

President Bush will leave Russia for Vilnius, Lithuania on Friday evening. And on Saturday, the President will hold a bilateral meeting with the President of Lithuania, as well as a joint meeting with the Presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The President will then travel to Bucharest, Romania, where he will meet with Romanian President Iliescu, and make remarks to the Romanian people at a square in central Bucharest. President and Mrs. Bush will return to Washington on Saturday evening.

And now I'm happy to take your questions. Ron.

Q As the President prepares to head overseas, Americans are being warned again about potential threats at this time

by the FBI, saying that al Qaeda is planing a spectacular attack that could involve massive casualties. Just for the record, what could Americans do about this, and is there any intelligence pointing to a specific time, place or method?

DR. RICE: The warnings that have gone out recently really are a summary of intelligence, not a new warning. This is a summary of intelligence as we know it.

It is important that Americans know when this sort of thing comes to the attention of the administration. We would ask Americans to do what the President has asked them a number of times to do, which is remain vigilant, because the American people are, in many ways, the first line of defense. There have been many cases in which Americans who were alert to suspicious circumstances around them have been able to tip law enforcement officials.

I will say that a lot is being done to bring additional protective measures, particularly to critical infrastructure locations around the United States. There is a very active now program of coordination on this particular period of time with both public and private entities, and at the federal, state and local areas -- local levels. And we are raising protective measures in a number of places around the country. But there are not specifics, Ron, as to time, date or, for that matter, very much about how this might carry out. So we think this is what we need to do at this point.

Q Dr. Rice, because of these warnings, critics have suggested that the administration is focused too much on the war, or possibility of war against Iraq, and not enough on the terrorism threat at home. And ordinary citizens continue to ask, why go after Iraq now if we have this unfinished problem right here at home?

DR. RICE: Well, let me start by saying that the President begins his day at 8:00 a.m. in the morning with the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, joined shortly after that by my colleague Tom Ridge, and the FBI Director, and his counterterrorism person to review the counter -- the terrorism threats to the United States. He does not begin his day on Iraq. He begins his day on the war on terrorism and the threat levels, and the threat information that we have about the United States. This is a central focus of this administration.

And the war on terrorism, as the President said back on September 20th when he addressed the Congress, is being fought on many fronts. It is a war that is many times being fought in the shadows, so that it's not always on television screens. Yes, it is different than the early phases of the war when we were in a large-scale military operation in Afghanistan. But we should focus our attention also on how much disruption of al Qaeda there has been.

There have been a number of -- numerous senior leaders of al Qaeda that have either been eliminated, incarcerated, or detained someplace. One of the reasons that we have different sources of information that we did not have is that we have some of those people in custody who are informing us about how al Qaeda operates, about what various things might mean. This is a war on terrorism that is going to be ongoing for a long time, but that is being fought very aggressively and will continue to be fought very aggressively.

That said, it is also the case that the worst nightmare that we would face is the combination of extremism with a hostile regime armed with weapons of mass destruction. And the President has made very clear that he believes the Iraqi regime is a regime that, both through its efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction and its long-known support for terrorism, is a potential threat for exactly that nexus. And so Iraq is a part of the war on terrorism. But the part of the war on terrorism that is going after al Qaeda and disrupting and trying to protect the country is fought aggressively every day, every hour by this administration and that's how the President begins his day.

Q Dr. Rice, are you looking for a statement of support from the NATO meeting on Iraq? And are you looking for a military commitment? If not, why not?

DR. RICE: This is a summit that is going to celebrate an historic moment for NATO, which is the expansion of NATO into territories that I think nobody ever thought NATO would expand into. And that is really the central purpose of this summit. It is also the central purpose of this summit to talk about how to improve NATO's capabilities to deal with the threats that we face today.

Now, of course, we expect that Iraq will be discussed and, of course, the President will discuss Iraq in bilaterals and probably in the NATO Council, as well. But there is a lot of work that has already gone on and is already going on in terms of coalition building for Iraq. We now have a U.N. Security Council resolution that is 15 to 0, so it's not just NATO that is united about what to do about Saddam Hussein, it's the entire world that is united.

I suspect that we will hear from NATO partners what they are prepared to do and what they can do, but that's not the purpose of this summit. The purpose of this summit is to invite new members in, to celebrate NATO's future, and to talk about how far NATO has come and how it remains a vital and viable alliance some 11 years after the end of the Cold War.

Q So you're not expecting some sort of statement of support?

DR. RICE: Well, there will undoubtedly be discussion of this and there probably will be statements about it. But that's not the central purpose of this meeting. But I assume that there will be some kind of statement from NATO about this.

Q Dr. Rice, why is it necessary for the United States Air Force to control the airspace above Prague, to secure Prague during the summit? What does that say about the capabilities gap within NATO? And in what way will that gap be addressed at this summit?

DR. RICE: Let's remember that the United States is, of course, a member of NATO. And so whatever assets the United States can lend to protection of NATO during the NATO summit, it's perfectly appropriate for the United States to do that. One of the things that we will discuss at the summit is how to think about getting new capabilities for NATO members. You will have very -- a lot of small members of NATO, for instance, for the first time. And they cannot -- across the entire range of military capabilities -- contribute. But they can contribute in specific ways, in niche ways to the overall military capability of NATO. So that will be discussed.

The truth of the matter is that everybody is having to reassess capabilities at this time. Everybody is having to make a transformation. This isn't just something that NATO and the Europeans are having to do. The United States, itself, is having to make a transformation and having to assess capabilities. And I think you will see that this is an issue that the NATO Alliance takes seriously, that member states take seriously, and that we will make some progress on exactly this.

Q -- the question of financial commitment?

DR. RICE: Some of it is certainly a question of financial commitment. But it's also a question of getting the mission right and determining what capabilities you really need.

Q Dr. Rice, what can you say about what you and your colleagues have learned about how al Qaeda is operating now? And if the presumption is that Osama bin Laden is still alive, is he playing the same role that he's played in the past as sort of the brains and the person who sets into motion any plots?

DR. RICE: David, I don't think that we can be certain of what role Osama bin Laden is or is not playing. What we have to assume is that whatever al Qaeda is doing in terms of command and control has to be different than what it was doing before because they don't have the home base in Afghanistan. And that is a good thing.

We, obviously, also are working harder in an international fashion to disrupt their activities than we were prior to 9/11. We just simply have a much more -- a much larger umbrella of intelligence and law enforcement, a much more coordinated effort of law enforcement and intelligence than the world has seen ever on any target. And so that is another factor in disrupting and making it hard to operate. But, of course, it is adaptable. It's an adaptable organization. We have to assume that it's trying to adapt.

Our goal has to be to, every day with our partners around the world, take as much information as we possibly can, assess it and try to respond to it. And that is what we do on a daily basis. The al Qaeda operations in Afghanistan were destroyed. Another piece of this is to make sure that there are not other places that they can puddle, or other places that they can gain the kind of foothold that they did in Afghanistan. And that's why you see us working with countries like Yemen or with Philippines or Indonesia to try and keep that from happening.

Q Can I just follow on one point? Assuming that people you have in custody may provide some sort of guidance on plots that may have been discussed at some point in the past, isn't it difficult because the organization seems to become more decentralized now, to fight it? Are you working on the assumption that where it can puddle together, then plots that were discussed before might ultimately come to fruition?

DR. RICE: Well, David, without getting into too great a detail here, what you have to do is to recognize that there are going to be adaptations that they will make and there are adaptations that we will make, and that we do have the advantage of having in custody people who can talk about the operation, who can talk about how various people were involved in various operations. That's all very helpful to all of us.

But in many places in the world, law enforcement and intelligence are working together in ways that they have not in the past. And I would just emphasize to you the importance of having this as a kind of worldwide activity, not just one that the United States is loosely engaged in.

Q Dr. Rice, some of us had been told by people here that the President would actually make a speech on Iraq during

this meeting, and that it would probably be the Wednesday speech. Has that now been changed? Do you expect --

DR. RICE: The Wednesday speech? In Prague?

Q Yes.

DR. RICE: The President is going to talk about NATO in Prague, and about Europe's future.

Q He's not going to make a pitch -- about Iraq?

DR. RICE: The President will have an opportunity, when he's with his colleagues, to talk about a number of challenges, one of which is Iraq. But the plan for the President's major address is to talk about the future of Europe.

Q Could you just talk about what you expect -- what course you expect conversations with Putin to take and what role you think Chechnya will play in those conversations, where -- what the President wants?

DR. RICE: Let me just -- going back to the point about Iraq, let me put it in context. Iraq is typical or the most important example of the kind of threat that NATO will face in the future. So it would be odd if this were not an issue at the summit. But it is not the reason for this summit.

In terms of the discussions with President Putin, I think you will -- obviously, we expect to discuss Chechnya in the following way -- recognizing that terrorism can never be a legitimate method for any cause. And the President has said that to President Putin. He said it to him when the Moscow events took place.

We still believe that the best way to resolve this situation is through a political solution that can take care of legitimate aspirations of the Chechen people, recognizing that Chechnya is a part of Russia, but recognizing that this is a part of Russia in which there are ethnic groups that have particular aspirations and cultural ties. And so I think they will talk about that during their meetings. I would be surprised if they did not.

Yes, a follow-up?

Q A follow-up. You once suggested that the difference about the situation in Chechnya is that because this underlying political problem, where you don't have that underlying political problem with al Qaeda or with other terrorist groups. First off, President Putin does not agree with that. He says -- he reminds that -- did pose political demands. But even in a broader sense, in Afghanistan, you used force for a political change of regime. In Iraq you are using blunt force for a political change in regime. So why the double standard?

DR. RICE: There's not a double standard here. Terrorism is wrong, wherever it is. Whether it is practiced in Chechnya or in the streets of Moscow or in New York or in Berlin, terrorism is wrong. And the President has been clearer about that than anyone. He's also been clear in trying to help, for instance, the Georgians to deal with terrorist elements in their country that could be contributing to this problem.

That said, political circumstances need to be dealt with, and I believe President Putin himself has said from time to time that, of course, Moscow would like to find a political solution to the Chechen circumstances. And so it is a particular history, it's different than a lot of other histories, but it does need a political solution. That does not excuse the fact that terrorism cannot be used in any cause.

MR. MCCORMACK: Let's make this the last question.

Q Could we make the last two? I have a couple. (Laughter.) First of all, what can you point to to show the American people success in the war against terrorism, given constant warnings of threat and warnings by very senior administration officials that we could face an attack with casualties of a scale much larger than we saw on September 11th?

And, second, how can you show the American people that the threat -- the description of Iraq as part of the war against terrorism is not a simple convenience, given that the war against terrorism is politically popular, and it is very difficult for people to see a connection between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda that even senior intelligence officials question?

DR. RICE: We know one thing about bad guys -- they tend to travel in packs. They do tend to help each other, they do tend to coalesce around issues. Saddam Hussein has a long terrorist past. Whether it is in support of Palestinian rejectionists or the Abu Nidal organization, or helping some al Qaeda operatives gain training in CBRN, or having meetings with -- between Iraqis and al Qaeda in various parts of the world, there's a relationship here.

Nobody has said that he has operational control of al Qaeda or that he caused September 11th, that's not the point. But the point is, if you look at a regime like Iraq, with a growing -- growing capabilities in terms of weapons of mass destruction and with an extreme animus toward the United States, and you look at the potential for that to link up with terrorist organizations, including with al Qaeda, you have to be concerned about that. And it is important to take account of what the Iraqi regime is doing and to deal with it, both because of that, and because you do not want Saddam Hussein, who is a homicidal dictator, armed with a nuclear weapon in the Middle East, which is the most volatile region of the world.

So the President has been very clear about his reasons for insisting on action toward Saddam Hussein. Terrorism is a piece of it, but so is the ambition and behavior of Saddam Hussein, because sooner or later the ambitions of Saddam Hussein and the interests of the United States are going to clash. And let's remember that this is somebody who isn't a status quo power; he is active in his policy.

In terms of the first question, I would just remind the American people that it took a while for al Qaeda to become the organization that it is; it took a while for them to lodge themselves in 60 countries around the world, including the United States; it took a while for them to become an effective organization. It's going to take a while to break them up.

We have a lot going for us and we've mobilized a great deal. You have now what you have never had before, which is the attention of intelligence and law enforcement organizations all over the world on these extremist activities of organizations like al Qaeda and their brethren. You have constant coordination and reporting and integration of everything that -- of what is know worldwide about them and activities to disrupt them. We didn't have that prior to September 11th; we have that in place now.

We have locked up or detained or eliminated important al Qaeda leaders. We have eliminated their base in Afghanistan so they cannot operate in the way that they have in the past. We have strengthened the resolve and the capacity of countries like Yemen and the Philippines and countries in Africa to deal with this threat. A lot has been done.

But I would also remind people that on September 20th, the President told everyone that this was going to be a long struggle, not a short one, that a lot of the victories would be won in the shadows. And victories are won every day. When a cell is disrupted in Buffalo, or when something is broken up in Singapore, or broken up in Germany, those are victories in the war on terrorism.

But the President has been very clear that he is going to lead this country in a way that shows perseverance and tirelessness and resolve, which is what you have to do when you're dealing with an organization that has been around for a while and that has managed to penetrate into a lot of places -- going to take time.

Q One NATO question?

DR. RICE: Yes, a NATO question. (Laughter.) There's a concept. Yes, sure.

Q If the U.S.-German relationship is central to NATO, as many people believe, what plans are there, if any, for the President and Mr. Schroeder to meet and talk?

DR. RICE: I'm sure they will see each other at NATO. As you know, they talked by phone about a week ago. Look, the relationship with Germany is very important and it will work and continue to work to the benefit of both countries. The Germans are preparing to try to become the next lead nation in the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. That's extremely important. And so we are working with the Germans and will continue to.

We have very good counterterrorism cooperation, for instance, with the Germans -- that every day is important to our efforts to disrupt al Qaeda and to disrupt organizations around the world. So, yes, it's an important relationship, and it's going to continue to work. And I'm sure that the Chancellor and the President will see each other at the summit, though they won't -- there's no formal meeting planned.

Q But why is there no scheduled bilateral meeting with the two?

DR. RICE: There are scheduled bilaterals with very few people at the NATO summit, and --

Q If Germany is so important?

DR. RICE: There are a lot of very important countries with which we're not having bilaterals at the NATO summit.

Q Yes, and on Germany, can I ask your assessment -- Germany has, in its recent elections, essentially taken it out of

any participation in any military action in Iraq, even one sanctioned under Chapter 7 by the United Nations. What is your assessment of what that does to Germany's credibility in a defensive alliance, military alliance like NATO, when it won't assume its responsibilities, even under the U.N. Charter and Chapter 7?

DR. RICE: Well, this is for Germans to decide and for the German government to decide, what role Germany can play. I would note that this is a U.N. Security Council resolution that has the backing of everybody in the world, including Syria. And I'm quite certain that the members of NATO, all of them, are supportive of trying to work to make sure that the U.N. Security Council resolution is carried out.

But let's be realistic; the Germans have done a lot in Afghanistan, in the war on terrorism there, in counterterrorism. We appreciate that very much. As I said, they're preparing to take leadership of the ISAF. That's going to be a tremendous contribution. But Germany will have to decide what role it can and cannot play to enforce U.N. Security Council resolutions if that's necessary.

Thank you very much.

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