

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

December 18, 2008

INTERVIEW OF THE PRESIDENT
BY
STEVE SCULLY, C-SPAN

Oval Office

12:52 P.M. EST

Q Mr. President, as we speak to you in the Oval Office, you're really one of only two individuals that can view the presidency through your dad's eyes and your own. What has surprised you about this job?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, being the son of the President is much harder than being the President. I agonized for my dad. When they would say things about him that I didn't think were fair, I agonized -- because I love him so much. And I sometimes didn't react so well. I would get angry at whoever said it; I was frustrated.

The President is a much different role and therefore, I mean, I understand it comes with the job when people say things about you. So we've got kind of a role reversal. My dad agonizes when he reads stuff about me. So I found that being President is actually easier than being the son of the President in many ways.

Q You took the job with a Florida recount, a shortened transition period, and as you reflect on that time eight years ago, were you in any way at a disadvantage in taking over this office?

THE PRESIDENT: That's an interesting question. I do think the Florida recount set kind of an ugly mood amongst some in the electorate. In other words, the election was -- in their minds, was in doubt. That made it harder to come as a -- to unify the country after the election.

In terms of the transition, I had a lot of experienced people that were ready to hit the ground and they did a remarkable job of getting us ready to assume office when we did.

Q You announced yesterday that the former Presidents will meet with the incoming President here at White House. Has that ever happened before?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't think so. This is an idea that President-elect Obama suggested here in the Oval Office when he came to visit me. And I'm going to follow up on it; I'll be the host. And I'm looking forward to it; it's going to be an interesting lunch.

Q What will you talk about?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't know. I'm sure he's going to ask us all questions, I would guess -- if not, we'll just share war stories.

Q Will you deliver a farewell address in this office?

THE PRESIDENT: Thinking about it. Thinking about it. A lot of Presidents have, and I'm giving it serious thought. I don't want it to be -- you know, kind of a real emotional goodbye. If I give it, it's going to be trying to leave behind some lessons learned.

Q Well, let me share with you what two former Presidents have said. First, Dwight Eisenhower in 1961 said, "Crises will continue, [we'll face them]. In meeting them, whether foreign or domestic, great or small, there is a recurring temptation to feel that some spectacular [or] costly action could become the miraculous solution to all current difficulties." And then he talked about the Industrial Military Complex.

THE PRESIDENT: That was an interesting observation. Obviously, each farewell address is going to be tailored to the circumstances under which the President had to make decisions.

I suspect if I do one -- and I really haven't figured it out yet, but I have talked to a speechwriter about, should I decide to do it, what would we say -- and one thing, of course, is going to be we have to be vigilant and can't let our guard down because a terrorist threat still exists.

Q Ronald Reagan had said, "Are we doing a good enough job teaching our children what America is and what she represents in the long history of the world?" In his statement of saying there's a great tradition of presidential warnings as they leave the White House.

THE PRESIDENT: Interesting. I haven't really viewed the farewell address in terms of presidential warnings, but I can -- it makes sense to say, I've learned this and I wish my successor all the best; and, America needs to be on the lookout.

One option for me is to talk about isolationism and protectionism, and that it's very important for us to resist those "isms." The world needs our presence. The people dying of AIDS on the continent of Africa need a robust response by the United States to save lives. We need voices calling upon coalition members to stay in the fight against the terrorists. And protectionism is rearing its ugly head -- witness the fact we had trouble getting good free trade agreements through the Congress with Panama and Colombia and South Korea.

So maybe that's what I'll warn about as well -- thank you for giving me some ideas.

Q How should we use former Presidents? How do you want to be used, in what capacity, as you leave this office?

THE PRESIDENT: It's an interesting question. One thing I don't want to do is stay on the stage. The spotlight needs to shift to President-elect Obama and it needs to stay on President-elect Obama because he's the President. Therefore, I won't try to get it to shift to me. And I'll be very respectful of him during his presidency.

I think each President is going to have to chart his own way. I'm going to build a policy institute at Southern Methodist to talk about, for example, the "isms" -- isolationism and protectionism and the need to resist them -- or the transformative power of freedom.

President-elect Obama, I am confident, will call upon Presidents to take on a mission. I will be happy to do it, particularly if I agree with the mission. For example, I asked dad and President Clinton to help on the tsunamis. But each role will be defined according to the comfort level of the ex-President.

Q Are there some things that you want in your library?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I do want to have a policy center -- you mean in terms of how it's going to function?

Q -- and facility and how it's going to work.

THE PRESIDENT: There will be the classic library, you know, rotating exhibitions to keep it relevant so people will be interested in it. And of course, there will be archives. They tell me that we moved 25,000 boxes full of files and memos. And I think they said, like, 30 million emails -- or 300 million emails, I mean, a huge number of emails -- none of which are mine, by the way, since I haven't been emailing.

And there will be a policy center. And this is a place of debate and discussion; a place to herald freedom; a place to continue some of the initiatives that we've started, like the malaria initiative on the continent of Africa, or PEPFAR. And Laura is going to be wanting to be involved with women's movements around the world -- the freedom movement in Burma. And the policy center and the museum are going to take a lot of time.

Q You've had a tough couple of years. Most second Presidents have had tough second terms. Why is that?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, in my case, I was a wartime President and war is very exhausting. War is hard for a country. And, you know, I made the decision that we were going to win. And there has been some critical moments where I guess I could have taken the popular way out and retreated, like in 2006, but instead went with 30,000 more troops because I felt strongly that defeat in Iraq would be terrible for the security of the country, it would be terrible for the morale of the military, and would be really hard for me, the Commander-in-Chief, to face a mother who lost a son in combat.

The other part of my presidency that's been hard is we've had, you know, huge economic turmoil recently. And, you know, I'm just so sorry it's happening. But it is happening and therefore I have made the decision not to let there be a massive collapse, which would hurt the average guy in the street. And what's hard about this one is -- a hard-working taxpayer, is making his mortgage, wonders why the President is using his money to save firms that got a little over -- got a little excessive in their desire to make money. And I understand that complaint. And my answer, of course, is, is that if I thought they could fail without causing the average guy real economic hardship, I'd have let them.

Anyway, so it has been a -- it's been an interesting presidency from that perspective.

Q One issue that continues to be in the news -- the auto industry. Are you looking for concessions from the unions in order to try to figure out how this is all going to come together?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, you see, there's two principles that's driving me on this. One is, a disorderly bankruptcy could be very destabilizing for what is now a fragile financial market. In other words, I am concerned about a shock to the system. I'm also concerned about putting good money after bad. And therefore, it's going to be very important that whatever we do, that there be a plan that the autos -- that would be management as well as dealers as well as labor -- show how they could be viable for the future.

You know, this is just a very difficult economic time for the country. And I am concerned about people's 401(k)s declining. I'm concerned about joblessness. But I made the decision that my team and myself will not let the economy go down.

Q When you took office, did you expect to have the biggest expansion of the federal government under your watch?

THE PRESIDENT: I knew the mandatory spending -- that would be Social Security and Medicare -- were going to rise substantially because baby boomers like me were getting ready to retire. I didn't realize we'd be in war because, you know, the attacks of September the 11th came out of nowhere. But once we were in war, I darn sure was going to make our troops -- make sure our troops had what they need to succeed. And most of the growth in non-entitlement spending came on the military and

homeland side. And you bet I was going to fund the troops and you bet we're going to make sure the homeland is protected.

Q Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan in their eight years used the veto pen three or four or five times as often as you have. You've used it about a dozen times.

THE PRESIDENT: Right.

Q Why?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, primarily because I was working with people in my own party. In other words, for the first four years of my presidency -- see, up to '06, we ran the Congress, except in the beginning. And so therefore I would sit down with colleagues -- not "colleagues," but party members and friends, and we'd work out our issues. And we got a lot done that I was satisfied with. Toward the end I had to veto because I didn't agree with what Congress was doing.

And one area where it was very difficult for me was on the budget. See, you sit here in the Oval Office and we'd agree with the -- I'd agree with the Speaker and the Leader of the Senate on the size of the pie -- "Here's what we need to spend, and here's this much for military and this much for education, this much for health." We all agreed to that. The problem was the slices of the pie got to be a problem because of earmarks. But I didn't have the line-item veto. And therefore, once you agree to the size of the pie you're pretty well stuck with what's in the pie until the President gets the line-item veto.

Q In terms of the institutions, do you think that the checks and balance work between this end of Pennsylvania Avenue and the other end?

THE PRESIDENT: Oh, absolutely, yes. I mean, and there's constant back and forth between the executive branch and the legislative branch, and of course the judiciary weighs in a lot. But yes, we got a great system.

Q How often, if at all, do you talk to the Supreme Court justices?

THE PRESIDENT: Rarely. Rarely. You know, Laura and I hosted a dinner for the justices and their spouses and -- yes, I may see them socially or, you know, at some of these banquets that you go to where the comedian makes fun of the President, then the President makes fun of himself and everybody has a jolly time, except the President. (Laughter.) But, yes, the justices will be at some of these dinners and I'll just chitchat with them, but never talk policy, of course, with them.

Q Media -- another institution here.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q A lot of cable talk shows, a lot of radio programs talking about you. First of all, do you watch the programs?

THE PRESIDENT: No.

Q And have the media treated you fairly?

THE PRESIDENT: You know, it's hard to tell. I mean, I will tell you my relationship with the media is -- with the individuals in the media has been very good. And that's all I can expect. Of course I read what's written, and a lot of times don't like what's written. Then I realize they may not like what I'm saying. But I have no complaints. In other words, I'm not one of these guys that say, oh, man, everybody misunderstood me because of the media. I'm a little disappointed at some of the platforms that encouraged harsh rhetoric.

Q Such as?

THE PRESIDENT: "Bush is a liar." And there's a -- it seems like to me that there's such competition for air space that some people feel like if they can yell louder, with harsher rhetoric, then they'll get noticed.

And the tone hasn't been good in Washington, and I've been disappointed in that, and I bear some of the blame for that.

Q Well, in fact, you said, on December 14, 2000, "I'm optimistic that we can change the tone in Washington. I believe things happen for a reason, and I hope the long wait of the last five weeks will heighten a desire to move beyond the bitterness and the partisanship."

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, yes. That was a hopeful person saying that. You know, there were some --

Q Are you less hopeful?

THE PRESIDENT: Am I less hopeful now? Well, it didn't work out the way I was hoping it to -- hoping it would. In other words, the tone didn't -- it changed some initially. Remember, we got No Child Left Behind done; we got some -- we worked together on PEPFAR. I mean, there were some bipartisan accomplishments. But the rhetoric got very tough. I mean, this is a -- some people here in this town use the politics of personal destruction to advance their agenda. I don't want to sound self-serving, but I haven't, and I don't think a President should.

But no, I was hoping for a better tone, and it didn't happen.

Q So what would you tell President-elect Obama? He'll have a Democrat in the House and the Senate, like you did in 2001. And he's talked about trying to unite the country again.

THE PRESIDENT: I wish him all the best, I mean, I really do. I hope he succeeds. He may be in a position -- maybe he won't have to deal with quite as contentious issues as I did, or maybe he will, who knows. He came in with a strong vote and he's got good majorities in the House and Senate, and maybe he'll get some things done.

Q You've talked about your faith. In those quiet moments of prayer, do you want to share what you're thinking about, what you're praying for?

THE PRESIDENT: Probably not, but I can tell you the effects of prayer have made this a very -- my life is joyous, believe it or not -- some days happy, some days not happy; every day joyous.

I have been comforted. I pray for a lot of things. I mean, I pray for my -- I pray for strength, I pray for comfort, I pray for friends, I pray for my family's safety. My relationship with the Almighty is a very personal relationship -- as is yours.

Q You are eight years older. Do you think this job has aged you?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't know, what do you think? I mean, I think I'm wiser, and that I've seen a lot more. I know I'm more knowledgeable. My principles haven't changed. But you tell me. Has it aged me? I can't -- I'm not one of these guys that kind of, you know --

Q You're biking on weekends.

THE PRESIDENT: Biking pretty good.

Q You're physically fit.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I'm physically fit.

Q Would you say you're among the healthiest Presidents to serve in this job?

THE PRESIDENT: Would I say that? I think so, I don't know.

Q So how do you do it?

THE PRESIDENT: I just work out and stay -- I'm a disciplined person. I work out every day, except for one day, and I make sure my scheduler knows this. Early on in the presidency I said, I want time to work out, because I think it's -- I know part of doing this job is to be a disciplined person. Like, I start meetings on time; I end them on time.

I have got a routine that obviously varies depending on the moment, but a routine that's pretty well set. You know, I get here early in the morning and meet with the Chief of Staff and the National Security Advisor, then meet with the intelligence people. And pretty much that way throughout my presidency, and the reason why is, is that I think it's important for a President to be predictable among the people with whom he works so that there's not a -- there's not a sloppiness in the organization.

And anybody can find time to exercise if they put their mind to it.

Q What made you disciplined, though? What in your life created the schedule that you now carry out?

THE PRESIDENT: You know, it's an interesting question. I don't really know. I was undisciplined at times. I may have always been slightly disciplined. But, you know, I used to drink too much, which is a sign of being undisciplined. And it took discipline to quit -- and maybe a little help from a higher authority. But I wasn't a knee-walking drunk, but I was -- you know, I was drinking and alcohol was beginning to compete for my affections. And so I quit. One night I had too much to drink in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and haven't had a drink since.

So that's discipline, as well. I don't know where it comes from -- maybe my mom and dad. I haven't sat around and tried to figure it out; I can just tell you it's true.

Q How much time do you spend reading?

THE PRESIDENT: A lot, yes, I'm a avid reader. I don't really watch a lot of TV, in all due respect. Of course, if I did, I'd be watching you. But I read a lot. I read a lot on airplanes, I read a lot upstairs at the White House, I read on the exercise bicycle.

Q What do you take away from books? I mean, how do you translate what you read into how you make decisions or how you go about your business?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, sometimes books are just to escape, like mysteries, and it's just a chance to get your mind off the moment. Sometimes I read books to -- a lot of history books, and I can take lessons away from the books -- like Abraham Lincoln. I just finished James McPherson's book on Abraham Lincoln and his relationship with his generals, which is an interesting topic for a Commander-in-Chief. One of the lessons of Abraham Lincoln that all Presidents ought to understand, particularly at times of war, is that the President must pay attention to the troops. And Lincoln went out of his way to be with the sergeants and the enlisted personnel as well as the generals, and he -- you know, he visited the wounded a lot and he visited with widows a lot.

And it's a good lesson for any President. And the lesson is, pay attention to your military, and work with your military, and show your military that you care for them. And you go to a hospital and see these wounded kids and word gets out all across the -- you know, all across the system, where -- and I've met with a lot of the families of the

fallen, which is my duty, but I think the troops appreciate that, that the President cares enough about their comrades' families that he would meet with them. And, yes, it's an interesting experience to do that. The Comforter-in-Chief is the person who usually gets comforted.

Q You have had a number of events here as we begin to commemorate the 200th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's bicentennial.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q His picture is here, obviously, his bust in this office. That's one example about the Lincoln presidency. But what else in the 17 or 18 books that you've read on Lincoln do you take away from what he meant for this office and the country?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, he spoke with moral clarity on certain truths. And one basic truth was, all men are created equal under God; 1864, he could have easily have said, well, maybe not all of us are created equal. But Lincoln spoke with certainty. I think Presidents need to do that, need to speak moral truth, have a set of principles that are inviolate.

Self-pity is a horrible trait, and I'm confident all Presidents have been -- have thought about saying, oh, why me, why do I have to carry this burden? And first of all, I don't believe it is a burden to be President. I don't believe there's -- it's not a burden to deal with problems. But Lincoln keeps things in perspective. If you think you got a lousy time, think about what Abraham Lincoln went through. I mean, it was a tough time for Lincoln: 600,000 people died; he lost his son upstairs, Willie died in the White House; his wife was not happy. And yet, he was a man who stuck to principles and stayed strong, and died not having any earthly idea of where his standing would be in history.

Q There have been a couple of kiss-and-tell books about your own presidency.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q My question is, whether it's Scott McClellan or Paul O'Neill or others, does that affect the way a President deals with his Cabinet, his staff, and does that worry you?

THE PRESIDENT: It's interesting you said that. That's a very interesting question, because I had staff members walk up to me and say, how can you trust me? And the answer is, I just do. I just do. Trust is a very important part of the White House. And the examples you just cited are very rare, very rare. Every President is going to have to deal with that. And it's essential that the President assure the people -- and when these books come out, assure the people here that, I trust you a lot. And I think my words calmed some of the folks I work with down, that they didn't feel alienated.

That's a fascinating question -- first person who's asked me that.

Q In our remaining minute, let me ask you about this office.

THE PRESIDENT: Sure.

Q The picture behind you --

THE PRESIDENT: That's called, "A Charge To Keep." It's based upon a Methodist hymn called "A Charge To Keep I Have," that was sung when I was first inaugurated governor of Texas. And my friend O'Neil, Joe I. O'Neil, from Midland, Texas, said, I got a painting based upon that hymn, would you like to use it? And I looked at it and said, absolutely. It's by W.H.D. Koerner.

The thing about O'Neil that's important is he introduced me and Laura in his backyard, he and Jan had a little barbeque out there. And there was two other guests, me and Laura. And about three months later, we were married.

The importance of that painting is that it's obviously a religious painting. And I tell people the President should never promote a religion. But the President always ought to jealously guard and defend the right for anybody to worship or not worship, that we're all equal -- if we're Hindu, Jew, Muslim, it doesn't matter. It just doesn't matter. The greatness about America is you can choose and worship the way you want to worship.

Q And this desk?

THE PRESIDENT: It's called the Resolute. I entertain people here quite a bit. And recently, youngsters have come in and said, hey, where's the hidden drawer? I said, what are you talking about? Well, it turns out the Resolute is famous in "National Treasure," which I have not seen yet. But it's even more famous because Presidents have used it. Roosevelt put the door on there. Out the door John-John Kennedy poked his head in the most famous Oval Office photo. And President Reagan put the bottom there to lift it up.

The desk was given to us by Queen Victoria. The wood is from a ship called the Resolute, H.M.S. Resolute, that we rescued in the Arctic.

And here's the thing that the desk reminds me of on a regular basis, that the institution of the presidency is more important than the President, that the office is more important than the individual. And that's important, because whoever is in here will have strengths and weaknesses. And so we will come and go, but because of the institution of stability, the ship of state will sail on. And the job is to make tough calls, and I've had to make some. But the job is also to honor the office.

Q So finally, you will leave this office the morning of January 20th.

THE PRESIDENT: That's right.

Q What will you be thinking?

THE PRESIDENT: I'll be wishing -- that's an interesting question. First of all, I'll be wishing President-elect Obama all the best, genuinely be wishing him all the best. And I will have said our final farewells. It turns out that the farewell party for the President stretches over about 45 days, it seems like. I mean, everything is a "last" -- last this, last Christmas Turkey pardon, last this -- not Christmas turkey, Thanksgiving turkey pardon, I mean.

Q Is it too long? Is the transition too long?

THE PRESIDENT: No, no, no. Actually, I think it's going to be good for me. I'm kind of an emotional guy anyway. I would hate to have the next to last and last day of the presidency be one giant hug-fest. But we will have packed up, and we will have said goodbye to the folks that we have lived with for eight years. And it will be emotional in that sense. But I anticipate with great interest watching an historic moment, the swearing in of the 44th president, who happens to be an African American male. And that's a big deal for America. And I will have a front row seat.

Q Mr. President, thank you for your time.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, sir.

END

1:20 P.M. EST