

Bush: 'You cannot show weakness in this world'

In an exclusive interview with 'Today' host Matt Lauer, the president says fight against terrorism will not end

Today show

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LIMA, OHIO - *Ohio is one of 19 battleground states for this year's presidential election, a state so important to the president's reelection efforts that after barnstorming through there Saturday he'll return again Wednesday — his final stop before heading to New York to accept the GOP nomination for president. In Lima, Ohio, President Bush held what has become a staple of his campaign — a question and answer session with invited supporters called: "Ask President Bush."* "Today" host Matt Lauer joined him after that event to talk about why he thinks stops like these are a good way for voters to get to know him.

President George W. Bush: I mean they see me, but they see me like, in a 10-second sound bite at times. You know, they've seen me deal with crisis. They've seen me weep. They've seen me laugh, and I think it's important for me to be able to share my experiences with them — and this is a way to do so. I mean, I've talked about some personal moments.

Matt Lauer: Right.

President Bush: I've talked about my family and it's just a different format that is not quite as structured as a typical campaign rally.

The president was heading to his next stop — a rally outside Toledo — and he invited me to join him on his bus for part of the ride.

Lauer: Here in Ohio, you won this state by about 165,000 votes in the year 2000. In the last three years they've lost about 200,000 jobs in this state. How do you look at those people who may be out of work and say, 'Rehire me?'

President Bush: Well, that's a great question and the answer is that, here's my plan to move us forward. I remind them about what we've been through. We've been through a recession. We've been through an attack. The September 11 attacks hurt our economy.

We've been through corporate scandals. I've said we dealt with all that and here's the plan to keep the economy growing — it's an energy policy, it's a health-care policy, it's tort reform, it's keeping taxes low.

Lauer: So you think if you look out the window here, you know I don't know if you can see because...

President Bush: I think I'm gonna...

Lauer: ...of the rain.

President Bush: ...win Ohio.

Lauer: You think?

President Bush: I do.

Lauer: You think you will? They're struggling in a lot of places.

President Bush: Well, some places they are and some places the economy's growing.

Lauer: So you think they will answer that famous question, 'Are you better off today than you were four years ago,' in the affirmative?

President Bush: I think over 50 percent will.

Lauer: Are you disappointed by the job numbers here? I mean, in your meeting just now, you talked about some success stories: small businesses adding 30 and 10 jobs here and there. But overall, in terms of the predicted number of jobs that were supposed to be created by your tax cuts, you haven't gotten there.

President Bush: Well we're up to about a million-five, and this month will be added in — it's progress. I mean, we're headed in the right direction. That's the point I keep making, and if you raise the taxes on the people, it will cause us to go in the wrong direction. I've laid out a plan that says, 'Here's how we keep jobs in America.' And it's a six-point plan, one that is, I think, based upon common sense and good sound principle that is important for job creators. And what the people want to know is, 'Do you have a plan?'

Lauer: You talk about winning the war on terror. You talked about being stable in terms of an economy. John Kerry says the same things. And so...

President Bush: That's what elections are all about.

Lauer: All right. So what is the major difference between you and Sen. Kerry, other than that you're a Republican and he's a Democrat?

President Bush: Well, I think there's a philosophical difference, which is that if you look at my policies they're all aimed at empowering people to make their own decisions. But people are going to be able to make up their mind. There'll be a lot of rhetoric between now and Election Day, and they can choose who they're comfortable with.

Lauer: Let me ask you about deficits — this year, \$445 billion. That's ballpark. You think that's pretty good?

President Bush: Yeah, I do. I do.

Lauer: All right — and by the way, less than projected — at that time we were projecting...

President Bush: Five.

Lauer: Five-hundred and fifty.

President Bush: Yeah, something like that.

Lauer: Does the deficit matter?

President Bush: Well, I think it does in the long run. I really do. And I think it's very important for those of us running for office to explain how we're going to deal with the deficit. I've laid out a specific plan that shows the deficit being reduced by half in five years. It's going to require fiscal sanity in Washington, D.C.

Lauer: If the deficit does not come down, if you can't pay it down in half by 2008, will you raise taxes?

President Bush: It's going to come down by half. That's the goal. I mean I...

Lauer: If it doesn't?

President Bush: There's no need to answer a hypothetical, 'cause it is going to. That's what we've got in place and that's what we've got in mind. Raising taxes now would be a disaster.

Lauer: Have you ever thought, President Bush, about what the first four years of your presidency might have been like were it not for 9/11?

President Bush: No, I haven't because I haven't had that luxury. Well, I haven't had the luxury because it was defined by 9/11. You know every day, as I tell the people, every day I wake up thinking about how better to protect America. It's just the nature of the presidency right now — one of those moments in history that is a defining moment for all of us. I really haven't sat down and had that luxury of thinking what it'd be like.

Lauer: You said to me a second ago, one of the things you'll lay out in your vision for the next four years is how to go about winning the war on terror. That phrase strikes me a little bit. Do you really think we can win this war on terror in the next four years?

President Bush: I have never said we can win it in four years.

Lauer: So I'm just saying can we win it? Do you see that?

President Bush: I don't think you can win it. But I think you can create conditions so that those who use terror as a tool are less acceptable in parts of the world — let's put it that way. I have a two-pronged strategy. On the one hand is to find them before they hurt us, and that's necessary. I'm telling you it's necessary. The country must never yield, must never show weakness and must continue to lead. To find Al-Qaeda affiliates who are hiding around the world and want to harm us and bring 'em to justice — we're doing a good job of it. I mean we are dismantling the Al Qaedaas we knew it. The longterm strategy is to spread freedom and liberty, and that's really kind of an interesting debate. There's some who say, 'You know certain people can't self-govern and accept, you know, a formal democracy.' I just strongly disagree with that. I believe that democracy can take hold in parts of the world that are now non-democratic and I think it's necessary in order to defeat the ideologies of hate. History has shown that it can work, that spreading liberty does work. After all, Japan is our close ally and my dad fought against the Japanese. Prime Minister Koizumi is one of the closest collaborators I have in working to make the world a more peaceful place.

Lauer: Your daughters are how old now?

President Bush: Twenty-two.

Lauer: "Twenty-two years old. They're approaching the age, President Bush, when they're going to have their own children. And when their kids are teenagers, are those kids — your grandchildren — going to be reading about Al Qaeda in the newspaper every day?"

President Bush: I know if we are steadfast, strong and resolute — and I say those words very seriously — it's less likely that your kids are going to live under the threat of Al Qaeda for a long period of time. I can't tell you. I don't have any...definite end. But I tell you this, when we succeed in Iraq and Afghanistan, it's the beginning of the end for these extremists. Because freedom is going to have a powerful influence to make sure your kids can grow up in a peaceful world. If we believe, for example, that you can't win, and the alternative is to retreat...I think that would be a disaster for your children. I'll tell you why. If Al Qaeda and their ideologues were able to secure a nuclear arsenal, then your children would grow up under the threat of nuclear blackmail. I think you would look back and say, 'Why did George Bush not hold the line?' We cannot show weakness in this world today, because the enemy will exploit that weakness. It will embolden them and make the world a more dangerous place.

Lauer: Think about the last three years if you will. I mean the day after 9/11, there was never a greater outpouring of support and compassion for the United States than in those days. I mean in Tehran they held candlelight vigils there, the flags were at half-staff in Turkey, in France, in Germany — gatherings in the street. Here we are three years later. And in, as I mentioned, parts of the Arab

world, polls show we have never been more hated. We've separated ourselves from traditional allies.

President Bush: Actually, that's not necessarily a true statement. America has, unfortunately, throughout our history of the Middle East and elsewhere, there have been periods where we have been disliked and periods when we've been liked, depending upon the decisions made by the country.

Lauer: But if you look in places like Pakistan and Jordan and they ask the people there, 'Do you support suicide attacks against Americans or Western interests,' something like 60 or 70 percent of the people in those countries say, 'Yes, we support it.'

President Bush: Yeah, except for the fact that their leadership in Pakistan is strongly on the hunt for Al Qaeda and he is a popular figure. President Musharraf is a strong ally in this war on terror.

Lauer: But you can't dispute the fact that there is enormous growing discontent and — I want to use the word hatred, and if you think it's too strong we can...

President Bush: Well, maybe...

Lauer: We can argue that.

President Bush: Maybe it is. But I will tell you, when they see a freer Afghanistan emerge and they see a free Iraq emerge, they will understand why we made the decisions we made.

Lauer: All I'm asking is, how did we go from this period of great compassion and support, [and now] three years later we've got this issue that we're talking about?

President Bush: I guess because I made some hard decisions. And we've made a decision on Saddam Hussein to remove him from power. Going into Afghanistan to get rid of the Taliban created some unpopularity inside...

Lauer: But you...

President Bush: ... of Pakistan.

Lauer: ...had great support in Afghanistan.

President Bush: Now, let me finish for a second. Not in Pakistan. You mentioned Pakistan. It was an unpopular move in Pakistan as you might recall. And yet it was the right thing to do. When I'm making my calculations and I say to the Taliban, 'Cough up Al Qaeda or face serious consequences,' I'm not doing a focus group in Pakistan, Matt. I made decisions on what I think is best for this country, and yet the decision to remove the Taliban in Afghanistan was unpopular in Pakistan at the time. And in other places it wasn't so popular either, I might add — same in Iraq, there's no question.

Lauer: Iraq was the turning point — wasn't it, really?

President Bush: Well, it depends on what country you're talking to. But yes, the decision in Iraq was a hard decision. There's no doubt in my mind we made the right decision, and there's no doubt in my mind the world is better off with Saddam Hussein in a prison cell. When Iraq emerges a free society, the people will see the wisdom of the decision we made.

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