

Faith Under Fire

President Bush talks with Charisma publisher Stephen Strang and other journalists about the war, the election and his prayer life.

Charisma publisher Stephen Strang and eight other journalists representing religious publications interviewed President Bush at the White House on May 26. Bush talked candidly about the Iraq war, his views on Islam, same-sex marriage and his personal Christian faith.

Bush primed the interview with a lengthy opening statement and then allowed reporters to ask questions. Besides Charisma, the publications invited to the interview included Christianity Today, World, Touchstone, Lutheran Witness and Reporter, Good News and First Things. The following is an edited transcript of the interview's highlights.

President Bush's opening remarks: Let me tell you a little bit about what's on my mind. Obviously, Iraq is on my mind. We are in the process of transferring full sovereignty and eventual freedom to the Iraqi people as they head toward free elections. It's a historic opportunity to bring peace to the world.

It's not going to be easy. These are people who have lived in tyranny. America must be firm in our resolve and confident in our belief that freedom is the Almighty's gift to every person in the world and that free societies will be peaceful societies.

In the short run we will use every asset to prevent an enemy from attacking us again. I believe they want to do it because they want to sow discord, distrust and fear at home so we will

begin to withdraw from parts of the world where they would like to have influence to spread their Taliban-like vision—the corruption of religion—to suit their purposes.

I will not yield to them—to their blackmail, their murder, their death or the fear that they would try to cause through death.

Here at home, the job of a president is to help culture change. I call it changing the culture from one that says, “If it feels good, do it” and “If you’ve got a problem, blame somebody else,” to a culture in which each of us understands we are responsible for the decisions we make in life. I call it a responsibility era.

Part of the responsibility era is promoting a culture of life. Father Richard John Neuhaus helped me craft what is still the integral part of my position on abortion, which is: Every child welcomed to life and protected by law. That is the goal of this administration.

Part of the government’s role is to foster responsibility by standing with those who have heard a call to love a neighbor, which is the center point of the faith-based initiative—one of the most important domestic initiatives I have pushed. It recognizes the right relationship between hearts and souls and government. Here’s the way I put it: “Government can hand out money, but it cannot put love in people’s hearts or sense of purpose in people’s lives.”

Government must recognize that those heart-changers are an important part of changing society one soul at a time. And government has a responsibility to support and nurture

institutions that provide hope and stability. That's why I took the position I took on the sanctity of marriage. I believe that it's a very important issue for America.

I think marriage has worked. It's the commitment between a man and a woman. That shared responsibility has been the cornerstone for civilization, and any erosion of that definition will weaken civilization as we have known it.

I call for a constitutional [marriage] amendment, and I want the American people participating in the process. I don't want this decided by judges. It's too big an issue, and the constitutional process is a sure enough way to get people involved through the amendment process.

And finally, I say to the people all the time, "Thank you for your prayers." Something is happening in America. When I'm walking the rope line, people say things different than they did four years ago.

The thing that they say different is, "Mr. President, we pray for you." I'll bet you every other person or maybe every third person says, "Mr. President, my family prays for you."

It's not, "Good luck, I hope you tear down your opponent." It is, "My family prays for you." And that is the incredibly sustaining part of the job as president.

Just an aside on a more personal perspective in case you are interested. I read Oswald Chambers every morning. He helps me understand how far I am on my walk. He's a great Christian writer.

Then I'm reading a devotional by the former chaplain of the Senate, Lloyd John Olgilvie. And next year I will read The One-Year Bible again. I read it every other year and a half.

People say, "When you do you pray?" I pray all the time. You don't need a chapel to pray. Whether it is in the Oval Office ... you just do it. That's just me. I don't say that to try to get votes. I'm just sharing that experience with you.

Q: A lot of people are taking potshots at you for being a man of faith and expressing it in the public square, especially in Europe on the BBC. France seems to be bewildered by you. How do you feel when you hear that?

A: I think I have a fantastic opportunity to let the light shine, and I will do so as a secular politician. My job is not to promote a religion but to promote the ability of people to worship as they see fit.

There's nothing more powerful than this country saying you can worship any way you want or not worship at all. On the other hand, I can't hide the fact that I am influenced personally.

Every day that I go to a town, I meet someone who has done something in their community to love a neighbor. And every time I get in front of a microphone and one of those people is in the audience, I herald their accomplishment. It's amazing the public interest in those stories. It is an easy way to lift the sights of the country by showing examples of people who love.

Q: You are quoted as saying, "I don't do nuance," in the context of war.

A: Can I explain that? When you're trying to lead the world in a war that I view as being between the forces of good and the forces of evil, you have to speak clearly. There can't be any doubt. When you say you are going to do something, you've got to do it. Otherwise there will be confusion.

It is incumbent upon this powerful, rich nation to lead—not only lead in taking on the enemies of freedom, but lead in taking on those elements of life that prevent free people from emerging from disease and hunger.

And we are. We feed the world more than any other country. We're providing more money for HIV-AIDS in the world. We are a compassionate country.

Q: You have at times described Islam as a religion of peace. You've caught flak for perhaps overdoing that a little bit. Then in London you said that [Christians and Muslims] worship the same God. A lot of our evangelical friends criticized that. Is it possible that there is ... within Islam ... something inherently evil that stands in the way of freedom?

A: We are dealing with extreme, radical people who have a deep desire to spread an ideology that is anti-women, anti-free thought, and anti-art and science. They couch their language in religious terms, but that doesn't make them religious people. I think they conveniently use religion to kill.

The religion I know is not one that encourages killing. I think they want to drive us out of parts of the world so that they are better able to have a base from which to operate.

I think it's very much more like a coming "ism" ... like communism. It knows no boundaries. I see their ambition as finding safe haven, and I know that they want to create power vacuums into which they are able to flow.

I think they have a perverted view of what religion should be, and it is not based upon peace, love and compassion—quite the opposite. These are people who will kill at the drop of a hat, and they will kill anybody, which means there are no rules. And that is not my view of religion.

Q: What are you willing and able to do to defend marriage and stop the gay-marriage movement?

A: I took a strong stand publicly and laid out a constitutional amendment, which in itself becomes a benchmark for people to rally around. It was a statement from the presidency that says the country has an alternative to [what] they're seeing on their TV screens.

But in order for a constitutional amendment to go forward, the people have to speak. Now, I'll be glad to lend my voice, but it's going to require more than one voice. And it's going to require people from around the country to insist to the members of Congress that the constitutional amendment process is necessary for the country.

The idea of giving people a chance to express themselves is a very important part of the constitutional process. I will tell you the prairie fire necessary to get an amendment passed is simmering at best. I think it's an accurate way of describing it.

It's essential that those who articulate the position that defends traditional marriage as the only definition of marriage do so in a compassionate way. I like to quote [the Gospel of] Matthew: I'm not going to try to take a speck out of your eye when I have a log in my own.

Therefore, this dialog needs to be a dialog worthy of the nation and worthy of a debate over a constitutional amendment. It's a very important discussion and one that should not be politicized.

Q: The 2000 election was one of the most unusual in American history. Some would say you are lucky. But in light of your faith, how do you analyze what happened in the election?

A: The closeness of the election was due to the fact that it didn't end election night. It was an interesting test of patience. It's like a marathon runner who has given it his all and is depleted and worn out, and the guys forgot to tell you that it's not 26 miles but 29 miles. You never really get to finish.

But I did get to finish in a way.

Laura and I went to our ranch and just said, "You put the best people in place to help on the vote count down there, and be prepared for the presidency if it happens." I was quite calm during that period. I really was.

I was spending a lot of time out of doors. I was tired. I was worn out. I had really given it my best shot and obviously I wanted to win.

But it was a different feeling because you know it was a legal thing at that point. It was a confusing period for the American people as well. It obviously got settled but it was just part of my presidency.

A president shouldn't worry about how history will judge him. I know how short-term history will judge me. If I were to read the editorial pages, I'd figure it out because they're the ones who write the history.

It's going to take a while for history to really judge the accomplishments of a president. Maybe 20 years from now we'll be able to figure out how I fit in. But the big things are going to take a while. When you hear this thing about being worried about my standing in history, I'm not. Most short-term history is written about people who particularly don't want me to be president to begin with.

Q: At the United Methodist general conference we passed a resolution that's not gotten a lot of press, urging civil legislation affirming marriage as between a man and woman. That passed by 77 percent, to the consternation of a lot of folks. That's very significant. I think we're the first mainline church to be on record supporting the Federal Marriage Amendment. Chuck Colson said there doesn't seem to be a sense of urgency from folks in the churches across the country. It sounds like we need to somehow ratchet up the energy in that concern. Is that what you are saying?

A: People have got to understand that the definition of marriage is being changed. The reason I thought that a constitutional amendment was the right avenue on this issue was because it would reaffirm the current definition of marriage and prevent it from being changed decision by

decision or act by act.

Q: You said something to the effect that your job is not to promote a particular religion, but you can't help but be influenced by your personal faith.

A: My job is to make sure, as president, that people understand that in this country you can worship any way you choose. You can be a patriot if you don't believe in the Almighty. You can honor your country by being as patriotic as your neighbor.

Q: You have had strong support from Christians who believe, like

Pat Robertson and others, that Israel is promised its land by God and that religious conviction motivates their political conviction. I'm wondering to what extent you think along those lines.

A: I view Israel as a friend and ally in democracy who is in a rough neighborhood. And therefore, step one, I made the commitment that our government will stand side by side with Israel against anybody who tries to annihilate her.

Secondly, I believe the best solution for peace in that part of the world is for there to be a peaceful democratic Palestinian state on her border. It should be run by men and women who hold the aspirations and hopes of the Palestinian people dear to their hearts, not their own corrupt aspirations. I believe it's possible.

I see development of a Palestinian state as a major change agent, along with a free Iraq, in a part of the world that desperately needs free societies. Out of this will come the ability for people to worship as they see fit, the ability for people to raise their kids as any human parent desires. Out of it will come the ability for people who have entrepreneurial instincts to realize their hopes.

I've been to Israel and I view it as the Holy Land as well. I view it as a precious piece of ground and as an important part of our history. I also understand that my job is to use the prestige and power of America to try to bring peace.

In my position I can't help but be a practical person when you see the pressures that are put on the world through conflict, violence and terror. So that's why I took the position I took. I took it from a perspective of seizing this moment in history and leaving behind a more peaceful world for the good of all.

Q: What is the hardest aspect of the [Iraq] war for you personally, and how has your Christian faith affected your perception of the war?

A: The death. That's the hardest part of any war. Knowing that a mother, father, husband, wife, son or daughter is lonely and sad and grieves because of the loss of a loved one.

My faith sustains me because I ask for God's blessings, strength, forgiveness and love. Part of my job is to comfort as best I can.

And interestingly enough I also get sustained by the loved ones. To walk into a room full of people—or maybe a room with

one person—who has lost a loved one and hug them and laugh with them, cry with them, hold them, whatever I can do to add a moment of inspiration in their life.

After most of those encounters I'm the one who gets inspired. The person who is supposed to be inspired does the inspiring. And you can attribute anything you want to it. But I can just tell you the practical effects of being with people of such strength.

And you know you hear the amazing statements from the mouths of these grieving souls that many times they are inspired by the Almighty. It's a powerful reaffirmation of faith—how from the grief comes such hopeful words and such sustaining words.

I think a person's faith helps keep perspective in the midst of noise, pressure, sound—all the stuff that goes on in Washington. A person's faith helps you to keep vision. In fact it helps clear your vision. One of the prayers I ask is that God's light shines through me as best as possible, no matter how opaque the window.

I'm in a world of fakery, obfuscation and political backshots. So I'm very mindful about the proper use of faith in this process. You can't fake your faith nor can you use your faith as a shallow attempt to garner votes. Otherwise you will receive the ultimate condemnation. Therefore the best way for faith to operate in somebody is to let the light shine—as opposed to trying to get my job mixed up with the preacher's job.

And the only way that you can do that is just be yourself without crossing any lines of politics and religion.

Separation of church and state is important in America. And by that I mean that people of faith should participate in the state.