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Bush Takes Responsibility for Iraq Claims

President Touches on War, Gay Marriage, Economy in Wide-Ranging News Conference

By *Mike Allen*

Washington Post Staff Writer

Wednesday, July 30, 2003; 3:20 PM

President Bush took personal responsibility today for including flawed intelligence about Saddam Hussein in his State of the Union address after letting others take the blame for three weeks. But he said history will vindicate the war in Iraq, even though no unconventional weapons have been found.

"Look, in my line of work, it's always best to produce results, and I understand that," Bush said during a 52-minute news conference in the Rose Garden's summer sun. "In order to, you know, placate the critics and the cynics about intentions of the United States, we need to produce evidence. And I fully understand that. And I'm confident that our search will yield that which I strongly believe: that Saddam had a weapons program."

Bush said administration lawyers are drafting a law that would define marriage as a union between a man and a woman, stopping short of endorsing the constitutional ban on gay marriage that is being championed by some Republican leaders following a Supreme Court ruling that effectively decriminalized sodomy.

Bush, exuding confidence and interjecting occasional sarcasm, discussed subjects ranging from Middle East peace to political fundraising during his first solo news conference since March. The session was called on less than two hours' notice as Bush prepared to leave Saturday for a month-long vacation at his ranch in Crawford, Tex.

Bush's aides have been struggling since July 7 to explain why he declared in his January address to Congress that Saddam Hussein "recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa," despite earlier CIA warnings to avoid the claim. Bush did not directly answer when asked July 17 if he took personal responsibility for those words, but he amended his answer today.

"I take personal responsibility for everything I say, of course," Bush said. He then shifted to the broader and more comfortable terrain to which he had confined his answer the previous time he was asked. "I also take responsibility for making decisions on war and peace," he said. "I analyzed a thorough body of intelligence, good, solid, sound intelligence that led me to come to the conclusion that it was necessary to remove Saddam Hussein from power."

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President Bush speaks to reporters in the Rose Garden of the White House. The president said troops are making progress in finding Saddam Hussein. (Charles Dharapak - AP)

— Bush Press Conference —

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Bush strongly endorsed national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, whose public statements had appeared to overstate the administration's certainty about the nuclear threat posed by Hussein.

"Dr. Condoleezza Rice is an honest, fabulous person, and America is lucky to have her service. Period," Bush said, rapping the podium for emphasis. In a later answer, he gave her credit for helping to monitor the behind-the-scenes progress of Israeli and Palestinian leaders toward meeting their public promises to work toward peace.

Bush said he thinks the goal of a Palestinian state by 2005, set in the administration-backed "road map" to peace, remains realistic, despite the view of many experts that it is unattainable given the current pace of negotiations. He repeated his view that "a free Iraq will help peace in the Middle East."

"I think we're making pretty good progress in a short period of time," he said. "We'll work through the issues that are nettlesome, and there will be some big issues that come along."

On gay marriage, Republican political analysts say Bush is trying to walk a fine line between his conservative base, which adamantly opposes the idea, and more moderate Republicans who want him to maintain a more inclusive stand. Bush was asked simply his "view on homosexuality."

"I am mindful that we're all sinners," he began. "I caution those who may try to take the speck out of their neighbor's eye when they got a log in their own. I think it's very important for our society to respect each individual, to welcome those with good hearts, to be a welcoming country."

"On the other hand, that does not mean that somebody like me needs to compromise on issues such as marriage," he continued. "That's really where the issue is headed here in Washington, and that is the definition of marriage. I believe in the sanctity of marriage. I believe a marriage is between a man and a woman. And I think we ought to codify that one way or the other. And we've got lawyers looking at the best way to do that."

The Human Rights Campaign, which calls itself the largest national lesbian and gay political organization, said Bush's plan would "codify discrimination."

The news conference was the latest example of Bush's efforts to rewrite presidential tradition to suit his style. His aides have resisted the high drama of prime-time news conferences with a long buildup.

"You're through," he firmly told a network correspondent who tried to follow up one too many times about potentially flimsy evidence used to justify the war. At another point, Bush squelched an interruption by saying cheerfully, "I'm just getting warmed up. I'm kind of finding my feet."

Bush made a joke out of his stumbling over the name of the self-proclaimed planner of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, who was captured in Pakistan last year. "Our people have done a really good job of hauling in a lot of the key operators: Khalid Sheik Mohammed, Abu Zubaydah, Ramzi -- Ramzi al Shibh, or whatever the guy's name was," Bush said, to laughter from the press corps. "Sorry, Ramzi, if I got it wrong." Then it came to him: "Binalshibh -- excuse me."

Bush playfully cut off a question about how he could spend the \$170 million or more than his reelection campaign plans to raise for the primary, where he is unopposed. "Just watch!" said Bush, who is holding 15 fund-raisers over the summer. He was unabashed in proclaimed that he will "do what candidates do."

"We're having pretty good success," he said. "It's kind of an interesting barometer, early barometer, about the support we're garnering."

Most of the news conference dealt with various aspects of the war on terrorism, including a warning on Saturday to airlines by the Department of Homeland Security that terrorists might be working in five-man team to seized commercial aircraft later this summer.

"The threat is a real threat," Bush said. "We obviously don't have specific data. We don't know when, where, what. But . . . we do know that al Qaeda tends to use the methodologies that worked in the past. That's kind of their mindset."

Bush spoke of "hopeful signs" on the economy, saying, "I'm optimistic about the future, and I believe you'll see more jobs created."

He said the majority of the mounting budget deficit, now estimated by the White House at \$455 billion this year and more next year, is not caused by his tax cuts. "I made the decision to address the recession by a tax cut and so part of the deficit, no question, was caused by taxes -- about 25 percent of the deficit," he said. "The other 75 -- 50 percent caused by lack of revenues and 25 percent caused by additional spending on the war on terror."

Bush, a former governor, brushed off a question about the recall election in California on Oct. 7, when voters will decide whether to retain Gov. Gray Davis (D). "I've got a lot of things on my mind, and I view it like a interested political observer would view it," he said. "We're not used to recalls in Texas, for example -- thankfully."

Staff writers Alan Cooperman and Dana Milbank contributed to this report.

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