

## Obama Ponders Outreach to Elements of Taliban *New York Times*, March 8, 2009

By HELENE COOPER and SHERYL GAY STOLBERG

WASHINGTON — President Obama declared in an interview that the United States was not winning the war in Afghanistan and opened the door to a reconciliation process in which the American military would reach out to moderate elements of the Taliban, much as it did with Sunni militias in Iraq.

Mr. Obama pointed to the success in peeling Iraqi insurgents away from more hard-core elements of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, a strategy that many credit as much as the increase of American forces with turning the war around in the last two years. “There may be some comparable opportunities in Afghanistan and in the Pakistani region,” he said, while cautioning that solutions in Afghanistan will be complicated.

In a 35-minute conversation with The New York Times aboard Air Force One on Friday, Mr. Obama reviewed the challenges to his young administration. The president said he could not assure Americans the economy would begin growing again this year. But he pledged that he would “get all the pillars in place for recovery this year” and urged Americans not to “stuff money in their mattresses.”

“I don’t think that people should be fearful about our future,” he said. “I don’t think that people should suddenly mistrust all of our financial institutions.”

As he pressed forward with ambitious plans at home to rewrite the tax code, expand health care coverage and curb climate change, Mr. Obama dismissed criticism from conservatives that he was driving the country toward socialism. After the interview, which took place as the president was flying home from Ohio, he called reporters from the Oval Office to assert that his actions have been “entirely consistent with free-market principles” and to point out that large-scale government intervention in the markets and expansion of social welfare programs began under President George W. Bush.

Sitting at the head of a conference table with his suit coat off, Mr. Obama exhibited

confidence six weeks into his presidency despite the economic turmoil around the globe and the deteriorating situations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He struck a reassuring tone about the economy, saying he had no trouble sleeping at night.

“Look, I wish I had the luxury of just dealing with a modest recession or just dealing with health care or just dealing with energy or just dealing with Iraq or just dealing with Afghanistan,” Mr. Obama said. “I don’t have that luxury, and I don’t think the American people do, either.”

The president spoke at length about the struggle with terrorism in Afghanistan and elsewhere, staking out positions that at times seemed more comparable to those of his predecessor than many of Mr. Obama’s more liberal supporters would like. He did not rule out the option of snatching terrorism suspects out of hostile countries.

Asked if the United States was winning in Afghanistan, a war he effectively adopted as his own last month by ordering an additional 17,000 troops sent there, Mr. Obama replied flatly, “No.”

Mr. Obama said on the campaign trail last year that the possibility of breaking away some elements of the Taliban “should be explored,” an idea also considered by some military leaders. But now he has started a review of policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan intended to find a new strategy, and he signaled that reconciliation could emerge as an important initiative, mirroring the strategy used by Gen. David H. Petraeus in Iraq.

“If you talk to General Petraeus, I think he would argue that part of the success in Iraq involved reaching out to people that we would consider to be Islamic fundamentalists, but who were willing to work with us because they had been completely alienated by the tactics of Al Qaeda in Iraq,” Mr. Obama said.

At the same time, he acknowledged that outreach may not yield the same success. “The situation in Afghanistan is, if anything, more complex,” he said. “You have a less

governed region, a history of fierce independence among tribes. Those tribes are multiple and sometimes operate at cross purposes, and so figuring all that out is going to be much more of a challenge.”

For American military planners, reaching out to some members of the Taliban is fraught with complexities. For one thing, officials would have to figure out which Taliban members might be within the reach of a reconciliation campaign, no easy task in a lawless country with feuding groups of insurgents.

And administration officials have criticized the Pakistani government for its own reconciliation deal with local Taliban leaders in the Swat Valley, where Islamic law has been imposed and radical figures hold sway. Pakistani officials have sought to reassure administration officials that their deal was not a surrender to the Taliban, but rather an attempt to drive a wedge between hard-core Taliban leaders and local Islamists.

During the interview, Mr. Obama also left open the option for American operatives to capture terrorism suspects abroad even without the cooperation of a country where they were found. “There could be situations — and I emphasize ‘could be’ because we haven’t made a determination yet — where, let’s say that we have a well-known [Al Qaeda](#) operative that doesn’t surface very often, appears in a third country with whom we don’t have an extradition relationship or would not be willing to prosecute, but we think is a very dangerous person,” he said.

“I think we still have to think about how do we deal with that kind of scenario,” he added. The president went on to say that “we don’t torture” and that “we ultimately provide anybody that we’re detaining an opportunity through [habeas corpus](#) to answer to charges.”

Aides later said Mr. Obama did not mean to suggest that everybody held by American forces would be granted habeas corpus or the right to challenge their detention. In a court filing last month, the Obama administration agreed with the Bush administration position that 600 prisoners in a cavernous prison on the American air base at [Bagram](#) in Afghanistan have no right to seek their release in court.

Instead, aides said Mr. Obama’s comment referred only to a Supreme Court decision last year finding that prisoners held at Guantánamo

Bay, Cuba, have the right to go to federal court to challenge their continued detention.

Mr. Obama signaled that those on the left seeking a wholesale reversal of Mr. Bush’s detainee policy might be disappointed. Mr. Obama said that by the time he got into office, the Bush administration had taken “steps to correct certain policies and procedures after those first couple of years” after the Sept. 11 attacks.

He credited not Mr. Bush but the former [Central Intelligence Agency](#) director [Michael V. Hayden](#) and the former director of national intelligence [Mike McConnell](#), who “really had America’s security interests in mind when they acted, and I think were mindful of American values and ideals.”

Turning to domestic affairs, Mr. Obama indicated that the end was not in sight when it came to the economic crisis and suggested that he expected it could take another \$750 billion to address the problem of weak and failing financial institutions beyond the \$700 billion already approved. Maintaining support for the additional costs of bailouts is quite likely to be among Mr. Obama’s biggest challenges, given the anger that many Americans feel toward Wall Street executives who they believe are being unduly rewarded with bailout money.

The budget plan he released last month included a placeholder estimate of \$250 billion for additional bank bailouts — an amount that represents the projected long-term cost to taxpayers of a \$750 billion infusion into the financial sector — and in the interview Mr. Obama indicated that those figures were what he was likely to seek from Congress.

“We have no reason to revise that estimate,” he said.

Addressing the fear and uncertainty among Americans as job losses mount and stock markets sink, Mr. Obama urged Americans to “be prudent” in their personal financial decisions, but not to hunker down so much that it would further slow the recovery.

“What I don’t think people should do is suddenly stuff money in their mattresses and pull back completely from spending,” he said.

Still, he avoided guessing when the situation might begin to turn around. “Our belief and expectation is that we will get all the pillars in place for recovery this year,” he said. “How long it will take before recovery actually

translates into stronger job markets and so forth is going to depend on a whole range of factors.”

He added that “part of what you’re seeing now is weaknesses in Europe that are actually greater than some weaknesses here, bouncing back and having an impact on our markets.”

Mr. Obama’s uncertain forecast about when the economy will begin to rebound contrasted with the projections embedded in the budget he recently released.

That plan rested on the assumption that the economy would shrink by 1.2 percent this year, a projection that many economists, including some in his administration, consider overly optimistic because it implies the economy would bounce back in the second half of this year.

As he settles into his new job, Mr. Obama

said he spent much of his time reading briefing books, but still tried to stay in touch by perusing newspapers and thumbing through weekly newsmagazines. But he said he did not watch much television, except basketball games.

Mr. Obama rode to the White House partly on his savvy use of new technology, and he has a staff-written blog on his presidential Web site. Even so, he said he did not find blogs to be reliable, citing the economy as one example.

“Part of the reason we don’t spend a lot of time looking at blogs,” he said, “is because if you haven’t looked at it very carefully, then you may be under the impression that somehow there’s a clean answer one way or another — well, you just [nationalize](#) all the banks, or you just leave them alone and they’ll be fine.”

*Jeff Zeleny and Peter Baker contributed reporting.*