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CAL THOMAS: Firm on freedom

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Responding to criticism from some Democrats over his Iraq policy and their calls to begin an immediate troop withdrawal, President George W. Bush told me in a one-on-one Oval Office interview the day before his State of the Union address that his critics have things out of order.

"Timetables are a mistake," he said. "The enemies can wait out timetables. ... The enemies will lie low, a timetable happens, then they strike. I have a different view. I believe we ought to (first) achieve the goal ... and the goal is to, obviously, help this country realize its dreams."

Asked if he was nervous or had any doubts the day before the Iraq election that it would go well, the president said, "Any time there's uncertainty, you, obviously, think about all the alternatives. But in the end, I had great faith. And I believe truly that if given a chance, people will vote, people want to be free."

About the low turnout of Iraq's minority Sunni Muslim population, the president said he had spoken with King Abdullah of Jordan, who he said told him there was a high turnout of Iraqi voters in Jordan, most of whom are Sunnis, "which tells me that if the situation is secure, that people will vote." He added, "It is understandable in a province like Al Anbar -- where Fallujah was the heart -- where people had been dislocated and there's (refugee) camps -- you can understand why the turnout may be lower than other places."

The president said what is important now is for the emerging leadership to demonstrate "an expression of inclusiveness" guaranteeing "minority rights." He said he was "heartened by (interim Prime Minister Ayad) Allawi's statements, who is a Shia, that said to the Sunnis 'We want to work with you.' "

About the Democrat reaction to his policies and the names some have called him, the president turned the other cheek: "Washington is a town where you get all kinds of expressions." He said he doesn't take it personally. "I just let the facts speak for themselves. And the fact of the matter is the Iraq people, in the face of very tough odds, rejected this notion -- the sense that somehow certain people don't want to be free."

Does he think the vocal opposition of some Democrats aids and comforts America's enemies, as was the case during Vietnam? "I think it's different this time," he replied. "The terrorists are really watching how resolute this government is -- and the elections confirmed our country's desire to stay there and complete the mission. And they see not only ... that the Congress is willing to fund the troops, but they also see a military that knows the country backs them and so their spirits are high, and their desire is very strong to complete the mission."

The president declined to comment on the ruling by a federal judge on Monday that terrorist suspects held at Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba have a constitutional right not to be deprived of liberty without due process (the government is appealing the decision). But generally, he said, "I've always felt like the people that we detained on the battlefield who were illegal noncombatants should be treated in the spirit of the Geneva Accords, but that (these) were unique. It's a unique war, a different kind of war. And so we went out of our way to explain to the American people why Guantanamo was set up."

I asked the president if he has a mechanism for assuring any nominations he makes to the Supreme Court will follow his stated philosophy that judges should interpret the Constitution and not make law from the bench.

"We will do the very best we can to glean from writings and from, obviously, interviews the way a person would ... handle the duties of judge in regards to the Constitution," he said. "My record is pretty clear when it comes to picking judges for the circuit bench. And the record is pretty clear of some people in the United States Senate who don't want these judges to go forward." He said any Supreme Court nominations he might make would not only be capable of doing the job, but also reflect a "philosophical consistency" exemplified in others he has nominated to lower courts.

Asked how history might judge his administration, the president said he won't know whether he has succeeded "until years down the road, particularly if an administration like ours tries to do big things."

He said he reads "a lot" (he's currently reading a book about George Washington). About critics who have questioned his intelligence, he said, "that dumb thing, that's the elites who put that out."

Dumb like a fox.