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Bush's Lightness of Being

The grim tensions of post-9/11 statesmanship never wholly suppress presidential levity, Mark Silva observes

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This always happens to President Bush.

He wants to talk about something light, such as his passion for mountain biking. But his presidential guest, or prime ministerial host, wants to talk about something serious, such as the U.S. detention of "enemy combatants" at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Tuesday, after a meeting in the Oval Office with Guy Verhofstadt, prime minister of Belgium and avid mountain biker, Bush told reporters: "You're probably wondering what the prime minister is sharing with me. We're talking about mountain biking--actually, he's talking about the Tour de France. He's a huge advocate and a follower of the bike scene around the world."

Sure, they spoke about bikes, Verhofstadt said. But the Belgian emphasized another part of their "intense discussion" as he stepped out to the chilly driveway of the West Wing, explaining a dim European view of the U.S.

"There still is a negative image in the European public opinion, and it is due . . . to what's happening [at] Guantanamo," Verhofstadt told reporters. "What the public opinion is asking and waiting for are that the suspects are put forth in trials."

This was not the first time that a European leader had confronted Bush about the detention without trial at Guantanamo of prisoners the Bush administration has seized in its global war on terror.

Just last week, German Chancellor Angela Merkel lodged her objections in a private meeting with the president. Bush responded publicly with a little self-effacing humor about the disputed 2000 election that put him in the White House.

Last summer Bush fielded a complaint about Guantanamo from Denmark's leader during a visit to the grand country estate of Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who celebrated Bush's 59th birthday but also served him a helping of criticism over the U.S. detentions.

Bush responded with bakery banter. "I would strongly recommend the Danish birthday cake," the president said as he emerged from that session with Rasmussen in July.

For Bush, a little ice-breaking humor often serves as a way of defusing tension with his fellow world leaders.

And the ice can get pretty thick, as the president learned last winter in a marathon meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who displayed little patience for Bush's lectures about the need for democratic reforms in Russia. Bush emerged from that session in Slovakia intent on having some fun with his Russian counterpart.

"I said, `Vladimir, when we get in here, I think people are going to be very interested in this press conference, for some reason--I'm not sure why,'" said a jocular Bush, standing alongside a grim-faced Putin in a hall of the medieval Bratislava Castle. "Perhaps it's because you're a leader of a great nation and I'm fortunate to be one too. You can see we've drawn quite a crowd here."

Putin wasn't laughing.

Nor did Putin much care for Bush's criticism of Russia's selection of regional leaders by its regional parliaments, as opposed to popular elections. Someone else was seated without a majority of the popular vote, Putin noted--that would be Bush, who won his first term with a narrow Electoral College victory even though he lost the popular vote by more than 500,000 votes.

"This is, in essence, a system of the Electoral College, which is used on the national level in the United States," Putin said wryly, "and it is not considered undemocratic, is it?"

Bush has a way of finding humor even in that contested 2000 election, which spawned 36 days of political turmoil over his disputed 537-vote margin in Florida before a Supreme Court ruling made him the winner.

Standing alongside Germany's Merkel in the East Room of the White House last week, Bush attempted to defuse their differences--notably over the U.S. detentions at Guantanamo that Merkel had raised in their private meeting--by speaking of how much they have in common. Merkel became her nation's leader after a sharply divided election.

"We share something in common," Bush said. "We both didn't exactly landslide our way into office."

Everyone laughed.