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President outlines role of his faith

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President Bush said yesterday that he doesn't "see how you can be president without a relationship with the Lord," but that he is always mindful to protect the right of others to worship or not worship.

Mr. Bush told editors and reporters of The Washington Times yesterday in an interview in the Oval Office that many in the public misunderstand the role of faith in his life and his view of the proper relationship between religion and the government.

"I think people attack me because they are fearful that I will then say that you're not equally as patriotic if you're not a religious person," Mr. Bush said. "I've never said that. I've never acted like that. I think that's just the way it is."

"On the other hand, I think more and more people understand the importance of faith in their life," he said. "America is a remarkable place when it comes to religion and faith. We had people come to our rallies who were there specifically to say, 'I'm here to pray for you, let you know I'm praying for you.' And I was very grateful about that."

Liberals have challenged his faith-based initiative, which allows religious organizations to apply for government funds to administer social services such as drug rehabilitation and food banks.

The president said there is no reason to fear his conspicuous practice of his Methodist faith or his approval of religious expression in the public square.

Mr. Bush said he leans heavily on his religion every day that he is in the Oval Office and cannot imagine any man handling the pressures of the job without leaning on God.

"I fully understand that the job of the president is and must always be protecting the great right of people to worship or not worship as they see fit," Mr. Bush said. "That's what distinguishes us from the Taliban. The greatest freedom we have or one of the greatest freedoms is the right to worship the way you see fit."

"On the other hand, I don't see how you can be president at least from my perspective, how you can be president, without a relationship with the Lord," he said.

Michael Newdow, the California atheist who famously failed to get the words "under God" out of the Pledge of Allegiance, is now attempting to get a D.C. District Court to prevent clergy from participating in Mr. Bush's inauguration.

"I will have my hand on the Bible," Mr. Bush said, expressing a tone of amusement and exasperation that one day, even the 216-year-old centerpiece of the inaugural ceremony might be challenged.

However, Mr. Bush said that unlike many Christians, he does not think that faith is under



attack by culture at large and points to the "backlash" against attempts to further secularize the public square as proof.

"The great thing about our country is somebody can stand up and say, 'We should try to take "under God" out of the Pledge of Allegiance,'" Mr. Bush said. "On the other hand, the backlash was pretty darn significant.

"This is a country that is a value-based country," he said. "Whether they voted for you or not, there's a lot of values in this country, for which I'm real proud."

Mr. Bush said he has "still got a rigorous agenda" for his faith-based initiative.

The federal government has funneled "about \$1.2 billion" to religious groups so far, the president said, and he hopes to improve on that in the next four years.

"What we are going to do in the second term is to make sure that the grant money is available for faith communities to bid on, to make sure these faith-based offices are staffed and open," Mr. Bush said. "But the key thing is, is that we do have the capacity to allow faith programs to access enormous sums of social service money, which I think is important."

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