

# PLAYBOY INTERVIEW: FAREED ZAKARIA

*A candid conversation with one of the smartest foreign-policy minds in the U.S. about the cost of Iraq, the upcoming election and the future of America*

Fareed Zakaria has been called the Muslim Cary Grant and mentioned as a candidate for secretary of state—not the usual praise heaped on a journalist. One thing is certain: Americans increasingly rely on the articulate columnist and television commentator to interpret world events, whether they be the September 11 terrorist attacks, the assassination of Benāzīr Bhutto in Pakistan or the latest inflammatory ravings of Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. At a time when political discourse is often limited to sensational sound bites, whining and bloviating, Zakaria's analysis and opinions are reasoned, complex, bipartisan and coherent. No wonder his fans range from Jon Stewart, who reportedly has a "man crush" on Zakaria, to Condoleezza Rice, who has said Zakaria is "intelligent about just about every area of the world." *Esquire* named him one of the 21 most important people of the 21st century.

Before September 11 Zakaria was a rising star in the rarefied world of foreign policy; *The Nation* called him the "junior Kissinger." Then came the terrorist attacks and Zakaria's response, a seminal *Newsweek* cover story called "The Politics of Rage: Why Do They Hate Us?," a bold critique of the "dysfunctions" of Arab society. In the piece Zakaria argued for an American and international effort to help Islam enter the modern world; he was rewarded with a fatwa. Since then Zakaria has become the go-to commentator on terrorism and the Middle East, as well as

India, Pakistan, China, Russia—in fact, just about every one of the world's hot spots.

In addition to his columns for *Newsweek* and *The Washington Post* Zakaria will soon host his own weekly hour-long show on CNN. He's also the author of books about terrorism, international politics, economics and globalization, including *The Future of Freedom*, a *New York Times* best-seller translated into 20 languages. His latest is *The Post-American World*, essential reading for anyone who hopes to understand the future of the United States. America has a choice, Zakaria contends: accept and adapt to the new paradigm—the inexorable rise of the rest of the world—or suffer economically and politically.

Zakaria, 44, who lives in New York City with his wife, Paula Throckmorton Zakaria, and their two children, was born in Mumbai, India, where his father was a scholar and politician and his mother a newspaper editor. He was educated in India before coming to the U.S. to attend college at Yale, where he became president of the Yale Political Union. After graduating he earned a Ph.D. at Harvard, followed by his appointment as the youngest managing editor in the history of *Foreign Affairs* magazine. Then *Newsweek* called. Along with his column and occasional features, he oversees the magazine's international editions. He's a frequent guest on talk shows, including *The Daily Show*, and an analyst

for ABC News. He also hosted the *Foreign Exchange* show on PBS.

PLAYBOY tapped Contributing Editor David Sheff, who last interviewed Russian dissident and former world chess champion Garry Kasparov for the magazine, to meet with Zakaria in Manhattan. "I knew Zakaria would be smart," Sheff reports, "but I was struck by his graciousness. Even as he talks about a new world, he has old-world manners and class. That's not to say he didn't keep me on my toes. Name any place and not only does Zakaria know its pressing contemporary issues but he puts them in their historical context. It's all the more remarkable because Zakaria's beat—that is, everywhere—with its elections, coups, terrorist attacks, assassinations and wars, is a perpetually moving target. Whether about Iraq, Iran, Russia, China or the U.S., he challenged me, as he regularly does his readers and viewers, to think deeply about my assumptions."

PLAYBOY: For many of us the idea of a post-American world is unthinkable. We're too big, too significant—the world's only superpower. Are we wrong?

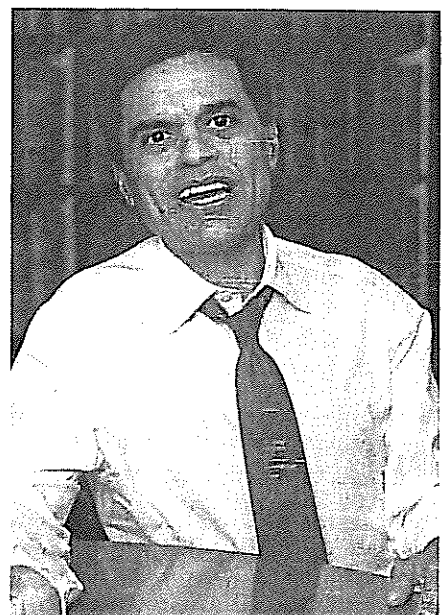
ZAKARIA: I began with the same confidence. I thought America was unstoppable too, that our position in the world was assured. But then I began noticing things that a short time ago were unimaginable. The richest man in the world lives in Mexico City. The tallest building in the world is in



"The rhetoric of Washington is absolutely pernicious—rhetoric that views the outside world as evil. Our foreign policy is trying to convert people to nirvana—that is, our way—or beating them up, humiliating and punishing them."



"We in the media have culpability. Bad news sells. We should really think about it. We have an obligation to place things in context. The truth is we are safer than at any other time in history. Where's the news in that?"



"We do live in a troubled world, but this is not Armageddon. Just because a two-bit dictator in Iran has some strange musings about religion doesn't mean he's going to end the world as we know it. Nor can he."

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID ROSE

Taipei, and Dubai is building a taller building. The next-tallest building in the world will be built in Dubai a year and a half later. The largest factory in the world is in China. The largest refinery is in India. I was in Las Vegas one day and thought, At least we have this. It turns out we don't. The largest casino hotel in the world now is the Venetian in Macao, and Macao just overtook Las Vegas with the largest gambling revenues in the world. Shopping, America's great leisure-time activity? The last time I was in Beijing they showed me the largest mall in the world, which has since been eclipsed by another Chinese mall. It turns out the top 10 malls in the world are all outside the United States. Just three years ago almost every category I gave you would have been topped by America. The change is fast and has only just begun. It's still true there's only one superpower, but things are changing in every dimension other than the military.

**PLAYBOY:** Some people would argue that our military trumps everything else.

**ZAKARIA:** From history we know that if a superpower relies solely on its military might, it will fall behind. At the end of their empire the British were obsessed by minor political disturbances throughout the empire, where they could go in and stabilize a situation with their military strength. It's the trap of hegemony: You begin to believe the only thing that matters is the thing you can do better than others and without others' support. It's the quick and easy path to decline.

**PLAYBOY:** But the United States also still has the world's number one economy.

**ZAKARIA:** Which is in jeopardy if we don't adapt to the changing world, if we don't embrace it, if instead we dig in our heels, close our borders, close our minds and try to stop change.

**PLAYBOY:** How are we trying to stop change?

**ZAKARIA:** First, we're in denial, and there are two or three streams feeding the denial. We've always thought of ourselves as exceptional. We *are* exceptional. But this country was created in rejection of the Old World. We were the New World. We think we still are, but a newer world is being formed, newer than ours. We're also in denial about globalization. We talk about it, but more than 80 percent of the U.S. economy is domestic. Meanwhile, we react with absolute horror at the prospect that there might be Americans who speak a second language—Spanish, God forbid—as if our big problem as Americans is that we know too many foreign languages. Also, there's very little foreign travel by Americans. Our parochialism means we really haven't noticed things have changed. U.S. businesses

get it, though. It's a very competitive world, and they've had to hustle. American universities get it too. Students are coming from everywhere, and research is being done everywhere. The place they don't get it is Washington, D.C. The rhetoric of Washington is absolutely pernicious—rhetoric that views the outside world as evil. In Washington it's all chest-pumping machismo. Our foreign policy is trying to convert people to nirvana—that is, our way—or beating them up, humiliating and punishing them. The idea of talking to them is ridiculed. There's no other country in the world where talking to people—just talking to them—is regarded as treasonous. As a result we know nothing about these places in the world that are rising and becoming vibrant and powerful.

worked, but we don't go back and look. It's unthinkable we would learn from anyone else. Instead, they are all bad, and we are good. Everyone is out to get us.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you deny there are dangers that justify caution?

**ZAKARIA:** Of course not, but they're blown way out of proportion, and we in the media have culpability here. Bad news sells. We say this blithely. We say it and kind of titter, but we should really think about it. We have an obligation to place things in context. The truth is we are safer than at any other time in history. Where's the news in that?

**PLAYBOY:** Safer? With Al Qaeda and similar terrorist groups still threatening us?

**ZAKARIA:** Al Qaeda has been very successfully defanged. Every government in the world realized it was a problem, and now it's on the run.

**PLAYBOY:** You charge that, since September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda has basically been a producer of bad videos. But what about the bombings in Madrid and London? What about suicide bombings throughout the Middle East?

**ZAKARIA:** Every motley crew calls itself Al Qaeda but has no operational or financial links to the outfit that directed 9/11 and the embassy bombings. Since 9/11 Osama bin Laden has done nothing except issue threats in videos.

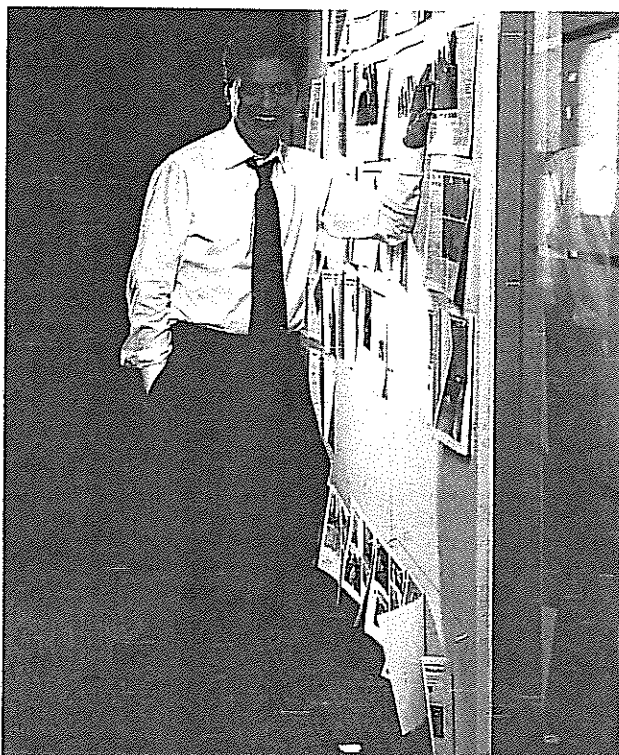
**PLAYBOY:** Are you denying the threat of terrorism?

**ZAKARIA:** It's fundamentally important that we recognize terrorism and Islamic extremism as real problems, but we must put them in context. We're told the Arab world is out to get us, but it's a small fringe. Polls in every Muslim society show most people reject the message of extremism and fundamentalism. Do they reject it loudly enough? Maybe in some cases they don't, and we should push them to. The Taliban is unpopular. Al Qaeda is

unpopular. The idea of jihad is unpopular. Yet we're constantly given the message that they're all out to get us, which of course in some weird way is doing Osama bin Laden's bidding, feeding the message of Al Qaeda and giving it more power than it deserves.

**PLAYBOY:** How about Iran? Do you agree that Ahmadinejad and a nuclear Iran are a threat?

**ZAKARIA:** On one occasion Ahmadinejad said he wanted to wipe Israel off the map. There's some debate about what he actually said, but let's assume he said it. It's a horrible thing to say and absolutely deserves to be condemned, but isn't it worth our pointing out that in the 1970s every Arab leader routinely said this? The big shift in a 30- or 40-year perspective is that he's the only



If 1.3 billion Muslims were really trying to revolt, you would hear about it a lot more often.

We talk incessantly about Iran, and Bush demonizes the country. But we know nothing about Iran, and the administration doesn't even want to talk to Iran.

**PLAYBOY:** So you favor talking to a rogue nation like Iran?

**ZAKARIA:** Of course. Iran is a very complex country with a very complex culture. Unless we talk to them, how will we know who they are? We don't even know anything about Cuba, though it's only 90 miles from Florida. For four decades we've had a fantasy that we were achieving regime change in Cuba; meanwhile Fidel Castro, until very recently, was the longest-serving political leader in the world. You'd think those two facts would be prima facie evidence our policy hasn't

guy in the Middle East saying it now. The Arabs—the Egyptians, the Syrians—have all moved to a reluctant acceptance of the reality of Israel. Now *that's* the big story but not what we often report. The polls I've seen suggest there is a disturbingly large number of people who think Iran is a core security threat that should be dealt with by military force. Why? The press keeps saying World War III will take place if the Iranians get the capacity to make nuclear weapons. Bush does. Americans are basically optimistic, open-minded people, but the press and politicians have this amazing ability to convince people we're living in a dangerous world and there are people out there trying to kill us. It used to be the crazies—the Joe McCarthys of the world—who were trying to convince you nuclear Armageddon was approaching. Now the people doing it are in high office.

**PLAYBOY:** Is it because they believe it, or are they manipulating the public?

**ZAKARIA:** I've never met a politician who is unaware of the effects of his rhetoric on his poll ratings. Politicians are aware that when they talk up this rhetoric, it makes people think it's better to have tough, hawkish people in charge. We do live in a troubled world, but this is not Armageddon. Just because a two-bit dictator in Iran has some strange musings about religion doesn't mean he's going to end the world as we know it. Nor can he.

**PLAYBOY:** But it seems dangerous to minimize the threat of terrorism.

**ZAKARIA:** There's always going to be what I call mom-and-pop terrorism. It's unfortunate. What could derail us, however, is the large-scale weapons-of-mass-destruction type of terrorism—nuclear terrorism. It's a real problem, and we should be addressing it more energetically than we are. The administration hasn't put the nuclear proliferation issue in front.

**PLAYBOY:** What would be a more rational strategy on terrorism?

**ZAKARIA:** We should certainly be tracing these groups, tracking their funds, doing everything we can to obstruct and intercept them. We should also make a much more active effort to engage this struggle at cultural, political and economic levels to make these societies understand that we share their aspirations for modernity. We want to partner with them. We see our future as being linked with theirs. We shouldn't convey that we think Islam is the enemy. Look, if 1.3 billion Muslims were really trying to revolt against the West, you would hear about it a lot more often than the occasional cafe bomb in Istanbul.

**PLAYBOY:** What about Iran? What would be a rational approach there?

**ZAKARIA:** We have to come to terms with the fact that Iran is a real country and has legitimate security concerns. Look at the neighborhood: You have a nuclear India, a nuclear Pakistan, a nuclear China, a nuclear Russia and a nuclear Israel. The United States has 150,000 troops on one Iranian border, and 50,000 U.S. and NATO troops

## We're Number...Huh?

*Fareed Zakaria's book **The Post-American World** predicts a future in which the United States is no longer the world's sole superpower. And we've lost some top spots already. Here are 10 areas where we used to be number one and who's there now.—Ben Conniff*

	THEN	NOW
TALLEST BUILDING	Sears Tower, Chicago, U.S.	Taipei 101, Taipei, Taiwan
RICHEST MAN	Bill Gates, U.S.	Carlos Slim, Mexico
LARGEST PRIVATE YACHT	Larry Ellison's <i>Rising Sun</i> , U.S.	Sheik Mohammed's <i>Platinum</i> , Dubai
LARGEST BREWERY	Anheuser-Busch, U.S.	InBev, Belgium
LARGEST ENGLISH-LANGUAGE NEWSPAPER	<i>USA Today</i> , U.S.	<i>The Times of India</i> , India
LARGEST MOBILE PHONE PRODUCER	Motorola, U.S.	Nokia, Finland
BIGGEST GAMBLING REVENUES	Las Vegas Strip, U.S.	Macao, China
LARGEST COMPANY	ExxonMobil, U.S.	PetroChina, China
LARGEST COMMERCIAL AIRPLANE	Boeing 747, U.S.	Airbus A380, European consortium
RICHEST BANK	Citigroup, U.S.	Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, China

are on the other border. You have an American president who keeps saying this is an evil regime that has to be changed. Iran is not just being paranoid. If you were in that situation, you would buy some insurance, and in the world of international relations nuclear weapons are insurance.

**PLAYBOY:** But doesn't a nuclear Iran concern you?

**ZAKARIA:** If you want Iran to denuclearize, you must recognize that it will need some assurances relating to security. The first step would be having a dialogue. Barack Obama said he would talk to them, and he was vilified, called naive, but you want to talk to these people.

**PLAYBOY:** The counterargument is that they want to kill us and that talking to people like Ahmadinejad is irresponsible as well as useless.

**ZAKARIA:** And it would be rewarding them. To which I say, "Look, we don't actually know much about them." Some people around the world have heard a lot of things George Bush has said and think he's crazy too. I would say to them, "Meet him. Find out." The reality is that Iran is a serious country. No matter who governs it, Iran has security concerns. The nuclear program was started by the shah of Iran, not the mullahs. Negotiating with them does not mean they won't be very tough. Remember that the best thing for Castro, the Iranian hard-liners and so many others has been to have the United States

as their enemy. We play into their hands. If we were to take a more sensible view of Iran and North Korea, to name two, we would recognize that time is on our side, not theirs. We in the modern world have the answers; they don't. Iran has a totally dysfunctional economy. The government isn't particularly popular. It's not a recipe for long-term success.

**PLAYBOY:** You argue for engagement, but doesn't China disprove that engagement leads to regime change and democracy?

**ZAKARIA:** We started talking to China at the height of the Cultural Revolution, when Mao, probably a certified lunatic, was running the country into the ground. It's difficult to describe how cataclysmically bad and antimodern revolutionary China was. From there we've ended up with a China that is peaceful, increasingly prosperous and modernizing. There's a rule of law, and the country is dealing with environmentalism, including global warming.

**PLAYBOY:** But China has no religious freedoms, and critics of the government are routinely locked up.

**ZAKARIA:** The Chinese haven't moved all the way, but compared with 1973? In 1973 anyone who told you China would be where it is today would have been accused of smoking dope. We move the goalposts when we say "But they're not a full liberal democracy yet." Yes, but there is more openness than you would believe. If you want to be an entrepreneur and



own things, you can. If you want to sue the government in court, you can.

**PLAYBOY:** What about Russia? Do you agree it's actually backsliding in its progress toward democracy?

**ZAKARIA:** Putin has struggled with constitutional issues relating to whether or not he can keep his position. In the old days it would have been easy. "What constitution? I am the constitution." I regard that as progress.

**PLAYBOY:** But isn't it a false sense of progress? In a recent *Playboy Interview*, opposition leader Garry Kasparov charged that Putin has acted as unilaterally as the Communist leaders.

**ZAKARIA:** It's a fair point, but Russia isn't just richer, it's freer in a hundred different ways. But yes, in five years there has been regression. Pakistan is similar. Twenty years ago it was basically a failed state going toward jihadist status.

**PLAYBOY:** In Pakistan what will be the long-term impact of Benazir Bhutto's assassination?

**ZAKARIA:** In an odd way it doesn't change things as much as if she had lived. She had the potential to change the political dynamic in Pakistan because she was the only truly national figure who was popular, modern and antifundamentalist. She was a plausible alternative to military rule. Pakistan will probably muddle through, but nothing will fundamentally change.

**PLAYBOY:** How about next door in Iraq? Initially you supported the war. At what point did you change your position?

**ZAKARIA:** One week after the invasion I wrote a column saying the occupation was going badly. I called for a much larger troop level and UN occupation.

**PLAYBOY:** Like Hillary Clinton and others, do you regret your initial support of the war?

**ZAKARIA:** I still believe the idea of creating a modern and democratic Iraq was a good one, and Saddam Hussein's incredibly brutal and tyrannical regime provided an unusual opportunity to do so. I believe we went about it in a catastrophic way that incurred enormous costs. So put me down as somebody who still believes it was a good idea but was very badly implemented. The road to hell is littered with good intentions. Perhaps my mistake was not realizing the Bush administration would be as arrogant and stupid as they were. I thought they would want to succeed. There was a legal framework to go in. I never bought the WMD rationale, but there were the 16 UN resolutions. It was a rare opportunity to get rid of an evil dictator, modernize the region and do it in a completely legitimate, sanctioned way that the international community would sign on to. What would it have required? Waiting three months so the French were onboard? At the time, Indian officials told me [if the U.S. had waited and not gone in unilaterally] they would have sent troops. If India had sent them, Pakistan would have sent them, probably Bangladesh as well. But the success of Afghanistan

turned the Bush administration's head and made them power crazy. It made them want to do it all by themselves, and it completely ruined us nationally.

**PLAYBOY:** Is Iraq hopeless?

**ZAKARIA:** If 10 years from now Iraq turns out to be a modern and democratic state, it will make a big difference in the Middle East. Will the price have been worth it? I don't know. The cost has been unconscionable for the United States. But I persist in believing that opening up the Middle East to be more modern and moderate—more democratic—is a crucial part of the answer.

**PLAYBOY:** Some critics of the Iraq war say America is creating a new generation of suicide bombers and terrorists throughout the region. Are we?

**ZAKARIA:** I think that's exaggerated. I don't think we're creating a new generation of them, but neither are we doing enough to stop the existing trends of radicalization.

**PLAYBOY:** How could we?

**ZAKARIA:** It's a very powerful thing to want to give up your own life, to kill yourself for a cause. We need to be a little bit humble about understanding that we're not the cause of all the things that go on in the

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world. This is an internally generated dysfunction, but we could be part of the solution. They all think the United States is out to get them. They all think we're trying to wage war on them, on Islam. At the very least we should ask, Why do people think this way, and what can be done? The vast majority of people in these societies want modernity. Of course they want it with a certain kind of cultural dignity, but that's true everywhere, and it's particularly true in the broken cultures of the Arab world. That means there is going to be a certain anger and rage about the Westernization of the world. At the end of the day, though, they don't want the Taliban. They don't want Islamic fundamentalism. They're searching for some in-between path. Meanwhile, Islamic terrorism is a lethal problem being perpetrated by a small virulent minority. The majority is not in any way supporting it. They are victims of it; they are the ones who die in the cafes. Al Qaeda in Iraq has killed many more Iraqis than Americans.

**PLAYBOY:** Is much of the anti-American sentiment throughout the world based on a fear that our culture will overwhelm theirs?

**ZAKARIA:** Bush feeds this, but life is going to be a cultural cocktail, a strange mixture of West, East, old and new. A lot of what people describe as Americanization is actually the rise of mass culture. Because America got there first—our companies, our products, our ways of living—America has become part of what people think of as mass culture, but it's more complex than that. The Chinese are now going to Vegas-style casinos, but these people hadn't been sitting at home in their courtyard, reading Confucius. They were poor villagers who were barely surviving. Now they have a little bit of money, so they go to McDonald's. Mass culture and American culture have been fused, but what's really rising is mass culture. Some of it has overtones of Americanism, but in a lot of places it has local variations and local accents. The future is all about fusion, even in America. New York already is full of sushi restaurants. I mentioned the largest casino in the world; it's an American casino built in Macao that looks like St. Mark's Square in Venice, which is deeply influenced by Islamic and Moorish culture. That's the cultural cocktail of the new world.

**PLAYBOY:** Your new book is about America's place in this new world. Bottom line: Are we in trouble? Do you predict the fall of America?

**ZAKARIA:** No. We will still be a powerful country, but it will be a different world. Other countries are growing faster than we are, so at a fundamental level there will be a relative decline. We're still vibrant. We're still vital. We still retain a central role in every game we're playing. But China is growing at 10 percent, and we're growing at three. In 10 years China will have a slightly larger share of the global GDP than we do. We have a great hand, but we have to know how to play it.

**PLAYBOY:** Exactly what's in our great hand?

**ZAKARIA:** We have this amazing quality of still being hungry and energetic, which comes from our openness. But if we give ourselves over to fear, we move in exactly the opposite direction. We close the very doors that have kept us vibrant. What has worked for America is that we take in the best ideas and the best people, mix them all up and invent the future. This is threatened by fearmongering on both sides of the political spectrum, the us-vs.-them mentality, protectionism and those who would isolate us rather than have us embrace and collaborate with and learn from one another.

**PLAYBOY:** As we speak, there seem to be three serious contenders for president: John McCain, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Who would make the best president in the new world you describe?

**ZAKARIA:** I think the Republicans have gone crazy, frankly, though John McCain is the one I admire most. He's quite old, though, and seems heavily influenced by neoconservative writings on foreign policy, which gives me pause. The Republicans in general do little but

scaremongering on almost every issue from terrorism to immigration.

**PLAYBOY:** How about the Democrats?

**ZAKARIA:** Hillary Clinton is an impressive person, but it's tough to feel as though she's speaking from the heart. It's puzzling to try to determine what she really believes in. I admire her but can't say I am in love with her politically.

**PLAYBOY:** If she gets the nomination, will you support her?

**ZAKARIA:** I suppose so, because the Republican Party has gone insane on national security issues in general and needs to have a kind of nervous breakdown like the one the Democratic Party had—and maybe needed—15 years ago. The Republicans have lost their essential moorings and morphed into a party whose heart seems focused entirely on religion, hyper-nationalism and a kind of xenophobia. Is that what it believes in? If so, it will be condemned to be a minority party for the next generation. So I would support Clinton, but I am hoping Barack Obama wins.

**PLAYBOY:** What do you like about Obama?

**ZAKARIA:** We need to make broad changes, and Obama represents this. We need a break from the past. He has been a breath of fresh air because he has been willing to look at the world and say, in effect, "Why does every problem have to be a nail just because we have a big military hammer? Why shouldn't we be talking to these people?" I think he's right about every issue he's been criticized on. We should be talking to the Iranians and North Koreans just as we did with the Libyans, Chinese, Vietnamese and Soviets. He proposed something that didn't get much traction, but he said we should look at relaxing the embargo on Cuba. Clinton comes out in opposition to it. She doesn't want to lose the Miami and New Jersey Cubans, but what is the point of electing somebody who won't change even an obviously failed policy like that for fear that more than an incremental shift is politically risky?

**PLAYBOY:** In the past there has been talk that you could be secretary of state. Well? If the next president calls?

**ZAKARIA:** He or she isn't going to call.

**PLAYBOY:** If it did happen?

**ZAKARIA:** People who have speculated don't understand the process. They don't understand the enormous weight loyalty has in these situations. I can't be on a team; it's the nature of my profession. I have to be independent. I piss people off on all sides. Part of my job is not to be partisan. I call things as I see them, which disqualifies me for politics. Maybe I'm kidding myself, but I think I can do more on the outside, at least when it comes to shaping the agenda.

**PLAYBOY:** You started out in journalism at *Foreign Affairs* magazine. Would you have happily stayed in that elite world of intellectual journalism, or were you destined for the mainstream?

**ZAKARIA:** When I went to *Foreign Affairs* I still felt I was being true to my academic

roots. Something like *Newsweek* would have been unimaginable.

**PLAYBOY:** What changed?

**ZAKARIA:** Once I got to New York I started writing a lot for *The New York Times* and *The New Republic*. When *Newsweek* called and asked me to write a monthly column, I thought, What the hell? I discovered I enjoy writing for a much broader audience. I never enjoyed the parlor game of intellectual name-dropping and long, meandering *New York Review of Books* pieces in which you try to impress everybody with your erudition. I simply wanted to communicate about issues because they were important. Then *Newsweek* asked if I wanted to turn it into a weekly column and edit an international edition. It was a big shift. I was giving up any pretense of the world of elite highbrow journalism. I enjoy doing what isn't supposed to be possible. In *Newsweek* or on the new CNN show I talk about international issues Americans supposedly have no interest in. The CNN show, for example, will be about the other 95 percent of humanity. Think about the last time you saw something on India or Brazil or South Africa. But since 9/11 Americans have

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*I'm Muslim and my wife is  
Episcopalian, but neither of  
us is particularly religious  
or observant. I can't fake it.  
I can't make my children do  
things I'm not doing.*

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cared. They understand that what happens in other places in the world affects us. If Pakistan is failing and careering out of control, we no longer have to explain why Americans should be interested. Not long ago most Americans couldn't have found Afghanistan on a map. But you could start at the top. Remember when Bush was campaigning for office? He was given a quiz on the radio. He couldn't answer "Who is the president of Pakistan?" and "What is the Taliban?" Two years later he knew a hell of a lot about both of those.

**PLAYBOY:** You once described yourself as a Reagan conservative. What changed?

**ZAKARIA:** I came to America in the early 1980s from a socialistic country. I knew central planning didn't work. Reagan's spirited defense of the free world and spirited anti-Communism attracted me. But then Clinton was exactly the kind of responsible pro-market politician who appealed to me because he was also compassionate, wanting to make sure issues of distribution and access for poor people were not neglected. He was pro trade, but he was also for a safety net. It was a combination I liked. Meanwhile, the Republi-

cans went mad during the Clinton years. Their attacks on him were insane. I always thought part of their rage was that he stole their best issues from them and left them with all the ugly stuff. It was around that point that I no longer considered myself a conservative. In many ways the positions I held were and are pretty much the same, but the political spectrum has shifted. The Republicans moved right; on the crucial issues of economics the Democratic Party moved to the center.

**PLAYBOY:** Were your politics formed when you were a child in India?

**ZAKARIA:** The India I grew up in was almost a different country from the India of today. It was very much an overwhelmingly poor country. My father was a politician and his constituency was outside Bombay, so we spent a fair amount of time in rural India. I saw the poverty up close. The other informative aspect of the India I grew up in was the fact that it was only a generation away from independence. My father had been involved in that struggle, and it was very much a part of his life. As a result it was part of the family's life. His cause his whole life in politics was amicable relations between Hindus and Muslims. He was one of the best-known proponents of a kind of liberal interpretation of Islam—a tolerant attitude on both sides. Meanwhile, my mother was a journalist and became editor of the *Sunday Times of India*.

**PLAYBOY:** Was your family religious?

**ZAKARIA:** My parents were observant Muslims but secular. They believed strongly in a multicultural and multi-religious society. I grew up fasting during the month of Ramadan, but we also celebrated Hindu holidays and Christmas. My uncle would play Santa Claus, put on a beard and *ho ho ho*. India was trying to be this pluralistic model, so you had to embrace every religion, every culture.

**PLAYBOY:** How are you and your wife raising your children?

**ZAKARIA:** They're aware of their heritage, and we talk about it. They ask questions. I'm Muslim and my wife is Episcopalian, but neither of us is particularly religious or observant. I can't fake it. I can't make my children do things I'm not doing. I'm trying to give them enough of a sense of it, an awareness, so when they're old enough they can make their own decisions.

**PLAYBOY:** Were politics discussed at the dinner table when you were growing up?

**ZAKARIA:** Our house was very much alive with politics and history. Also, my parents had lots of friends who were poets, architects, writers. That all influenced me, plus my father believed every common problem could be solved by the government. He spent a lot of his life founding and building educational establishments—colleges, schools and training centers—that are still in existence. Long before it was fashionable my father saw that India's great advantage was its human capital, and the key was getting poor kids into schools and colleges. There was always

an emphasis on doing something about a problem. My father passed away, but my mother now runs the schools.

**PLAYBOY:** Your current jobs are a blend of your father's politics and your mother's journalism. Did you set out to follow their example?

**ZAKARIA:** I had no sense of that kind of purpose, but I was fascinated by history and politics from the start because I had this amazing front seat at Indian politics at its finest and sometimes its worst. I saw the idealism but also the duplicity, deception and corruption up close. My father had to deal with it all.

**PLAYBOY:** What did you think of America?

**ZAKARIA:** India was technically pro-Soviet during the ping-pong of the Cold War, but every Indian I knew was fascinated by America. I was. There was a government-engineered anti-Americanism, but it never worked. The government used to have these Indo-Soviet friendship festivals where it would show Soviet films, and nobody would go. Meanwhile, the American cultural center was flooded with people. American universities were flooded with applications. Indians wanted modernity, and they wanted the American dream. It's still true today.

**PLAYBOY:** Whereas in many parts of the world there is an anti-American prejudice, particularly since the invasion of Iraq. Is it different in India?

**ZAKARIA:** Yes. The polls show it. India is probably the most pro-American country in the world, with the exception of Israel. In a 2005 Pew survey 71 percent of Indians had a favorable impression of America; the only country with better numbers was the United States. Americans have a more favorable impression of America than Indians do, but not by much.

**PLAYBOY:** When you arrived at Yale, what was your initial impression of America?

**ZAKARIA:** I felt it was a strange kind of homecoming. I felt so comfortable. Partly it was Yale itself. At home I was an oddball. I'd read Dickens for pleasure. At Yale there were actually other people like me. Plus I just found America so inviting.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you plan to return to India after college?

**ZAKARIA:** Yes, but I fell in love with America. I got involved in its foreign policy and politics and American society. I made friends. Toward the end of Yale I thought, I wonder if I'll ever go back.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you meet your wife at Yale?

**ZAKARIA:** I met her on a blind double date. It was 14 years ago this past Valentine's Day.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you ever imagine you would have an arranged marriage?

**ZAKARIA:** My parents didn't have one, so it would have been very odd to suggest it to me.

**PLAYBOY:** You have two children.

**ZAKARIA:** And my wife is pregnant.

**PLAYBOY:** How has being a father influenced you?

**ZAKARIA:** Being a father has been the most pleasurable aspect of my life. Weirdly, I was psychologically prepared for it. I think being married is a bigger challenge. It's that ability to create an equal partnership and an honest partnership. It's rewarding work, but it's work. Parenthood, though, comes easily to me. I find it physically exhausting sometimes, but I'm thrilled.

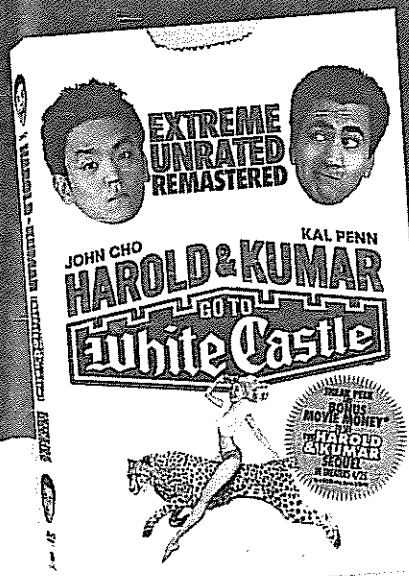
**PLAYBOY:** What led to your job at *Foreign Affairs*?

**ZAKARIA:** After Yale I went to Harvard to get a Ph.D. in political science without a real sense of what I was going to do. [Former editor of *Time* and ex-CEO of CNN] Walter Isaacson, whom I'd met at Harvard, called me up one day and said there was a job—the managing editorship—at *Foreign Affairs*. I wasn't interested. I thought I might be in line for a job at Harvard. But then I went home and thought, Why am I doing this? I never really wanted to be a professor. The *Foreign Affairs* thing sounded much more interesting, so I tossed my hat in the ring.

**PLAYBOY:** Few journalists are discussed the way you are: handsome, with references to Cary Grant. Is it flattering, embarrassing or appalling?

**ZAKARIA:** I don't quite understand it. I've certainly never thought of myself

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in those terms. I grew up as a pretty dweeby-looking kid. But look, while I'm not trying to become a celebrity, I realize that sometimes some element of that comes with the territory, especially when you're on television. Sometimes there's an invasion of privacy—I haven't signed up for this. I'm not trying to be a movie star, but I suppose that is the world we live in.

**PLAYBOY:** Did you make a conscious decision to become an analyst and commentator rather than a reporter?

**ZAKARIA:** That was a choice. I knew where my strengths lay. I was not a reporter. I came out of an academic background, and my strengths were more analytical, historical. I could place things in context.

**PLAYBOY:** At *Newsweek*, after 9/11, you wrote the famous "Politics of Rage: Why Do They Hate Us?" piece. Were you surprised by the intense reaction?

**ZAKARIA:** It was a highly volatile time, so not really. There was one reaction from the Pat Robertson wing of the debate, people who wanted to see the situation as black-and-white, Islam is evil. I got some nasty stuff. I also got some nasty stuff from fundamentalist Muslims because I put a lot of emphasis on the dysfunctions of the Muslim world and the use there of religion for political reasons—that is, using religion to mask political failure. A preacher in one of the London mosques issued a fatwa against me.

**PLAYBOY:** Were you fearful?

**ZAKARIA:** Initially I was a little scared but also kind of proud until a friend of mine in the CIA said, "Don't be so happy. They issue these every day." Nonetheless it was taken seriously enough that we had to have some consultation with the FBI. For a while my mail was put in Tupperware containers so people wouldn't have to handle it—things like that. In the Arab world I still think a certain segment of the intelligentsia feels I betrayed them.

**PLAYBOY:** How much of that reaction is related to your Indian heritage?

**ZAKARIA:** Whenever I write something an Indian or a Muslim doesn't like, on some blog somewhere I'll be described as an Uncle Tom. There's a weird standard by which your views have to be identical to what is perceived as the proper ethnic view on any given subject.

**PLAYBOY:** Isn't there pride among Indians for the international success of their native son?

**ZAKARIA:** That's probably the dominant view. In India, succeeding in America is celebrated in an unmitigated fashion. I think the fact that I have some prominence in the world of journalism is a source of pride for India. There's reciprocity because I am proud of my heritage, and I think it gives me a unique perspective on the changing world.

**PLAYBOY:** In this changing world, you have described two possible paths for America: increased nationalism and isolationism, or openness and an embrace

of change. Obviously you are pushing for the latter, but which is more likely?

**ZAKARIA:** I'm not sure. None of the big issues, like global warming, international trade or terrorism, can be solved by one country. It's difficult to get everybody onboard because there are more and more players, and they're more and more powerful, but the need for cooperation is the need of our time. The United States could play a historic role as the coordinator of and catalyst for cooperative endeavors. The fundamental issue is whether the United States has the desire to create common ground and can place common interests above the desire to be in control. We can't say, "We want to make all these rules, and of course they won't apply to us because we're special." That no longer works in a world where everyone feels special. So it's an enormous challenge. In some ways it requires a dramatic reversal of our worldview, but I am optimistic. I'm an optimist by nature.

**PLAYBOY:** Given human nature and history, including the history of other superpowers like the British empire

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*In the Arab world a certain segment of the intelligentsia feels I betrayed them. Whenever I write something a Muslim doesn't like, I'll be described as an Uncle Tom.*

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and the Soviet Union, how do you justify your optimism?

**ZAKARIA:** For the past 20 or 30 years, while everybody's been gloomy, pessimistic and expecting the world to end—whether through nuclear Armageddon or terrorism or the collapse of the world trading system—what has actually happened? The opposite. We're doing all right. There are enormous problems, of course, but we're doing all right. If we recognize that, everywhere, human beings are trying to raise their standard of living and live in peace and prosperity, there's a powerful wave to ride. If governments align themselves with that common human aspiration, there's a hopeful place to begin.

**PLAYBOY:** But are you optimistic that governments can align like that in an environment of competition, limited resources and extremists?

**ZAKARIA:** Governments have a capacity to make corrections and to change. We've seen governments like the Soviet Union collapse. We've seen governments like India's move 180 degrees. Can the United States engage in a similar kind

of change? It's very difficult because it's the most successful country in the history of the world. In business successful companies often die because they can't change—they have too much invested in the way things have been. But there are many other examples of companies that change. America can change.

**PLAYBOY:** Will it take a crisis?

**ZAKARIA:** That's the million-dollar question. Can the United States—can the world—make the adjustments that need to be made because we know what's coming, or will it take a crisis? If it takes a crisis, it may be too late. But a famous economist once said, "Unsustainable trends tend not to be sustained." If we run out of wheat, if we run out of potable water, if we run out of oil—if these things happen, we'll have to adjust. The danger for the United States is that those shocks will probably take place outside the United States first. We're too powerful, too strong. We may keep pretending we don't have to adjust, that we're too powerful and too strong to be affected. So what's more likely is a much slower version of the British empire: a kind of slow and gradual shift in position that isn't as noticeable to us. I don't think that's where we're going to end up, though. I think America is different. I have to believe that. I have to believe this country has a kind of flexibility and adaptability. America wants to invent the future. It doesn't want to be trapped in the past. America wants to move forward. America does not want to occupy Iraq, where we're stuck. I've talked to many of the kids on the ground there. This is not the old British soldiers lording it over and loving it. This is a country that doesn't take pleasure in those satisfactions. It takes pleasure in the two-car garage and the iPod. These kids want to get back to their tract home in Kansas. I think there is a fundamental healthiness to that perspective, and it has the potential to keep the country sane and not let it fall into the kind of historical trap every other great power has fallen into.

**PLAYBOY:** How do you see your ongoing role?

**ZAKARIA:** I feel I'm the immigrant who grew up outside this country but tells Americans to be true to themselves. Be open, don't be scared. Remember what made you great: the fact that America is an open, big, generous place where the future could be invented. America needs only to continue to be willing to be bold and brave. When you hear candidates say they're going to double the size of Guantánamo, you think to yourself, They don't get it. This is not just about a prison; it's about who we are in the eyes of the world and in our own eyes. Remember who we are: We are about openness, hope and the future.

