



Interview on NBC with Andrea Mitchell

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Washington, DC
December 19, 2005

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, welcome and thank you very much for doing this today.

SECRETARY RICE: Glad to do it, Andrea.

QUESTION: We've heard so much from the President, from you, from others in the Administration defending the eavesdropping on Americans. Why was it necessary to do this without going to the court when the court is available? And what we've seen in the past couple of years since 9/11 is that there have been more than 4,900 applications to this court, and only four have ever been rejected.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first let me just state what it is the President authorized. He authorized the National Security Agency to collect information in a very limited fashion on the activities of people who have links to al-Qaida and how those links might be communicated to people who are terrorists and involved in terrorist plotting abroad. This is about the geographic territory of the United States and not allowing American territory to be a safe haven for conversations between people with terrorist links here and terrorists abroad. It's the kind of gap between our domestic territory and foreign territory that was cited so often in the September 11 Commission where we understood that our intelligence agencies were looking outward, our law enforcement agencies were looking inward and there was no way to close the gap between them.

Now the President used authorities that are granted to him in by the Constitution, Article 2 and other statutory authorities. I think the Attorney General spoke to these authorities earlier and so did the President. The need to do this is because of the different nature of these people and their communication, without getting into the program which we still want to protect. This is a -- these are agile communicators, and we have to be more agile. These FISA act, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, 1978 under very different circumstances against more stable targets, longer term monitoring; and it's the difference between the need for monitoring the difference -- and monitoring and detection.

QUESTION: But you said "limited" just now. You said it was not very extensive. But the actual number is 4,713 applications between 2002 and 2004. That doesn't sound very limited and the judge involved who was appointed to this post by the late Chief Justice Rehnquist -- no bleeding heart liberal, this person -- she has only denied four requests and modified one. So what -- first of all, that doesn't sound very limited.

SECRETARY RICE: But Andrea, I'm not talking about the number of applications to FISA when I talk about limited. I'm talking about the nature of this program that the President authorized. And there -- this is a program that is very carefully controlled. It is reviewed constantly.

QUESTION: But all by in-house lawyers.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, it's reviewed by the lawyers of the National Security Agency, it's reviewed by their Inspector General, reviewed by Justice Department lawyers and by the way, briefed to leadership in the Congress and, in particular, the leadership of the Intelligence Committees.

QUESTION: Of course, those who objected such as Senator Rockefeller, by reports, couldn't object publicly without breaking the law, so they couldn't really --

SECRETARY RICE: Well, this was briefed more than a dozen times -- more than a dozen times. And so I think there is an issue -- I'm not going to get into questions of what people are saying about those conversations, but it was briefed more than a dozen times. And the need for this program I think is clear. The President has certain responsibilities as Commander-in-Chief to protect the country. He also has certain responsibilities to protect the civil liberties of Americans. Those are his constitutional duties and he's performing them.

QUESTION: Well, you were National Security Advisor at the time. What was your lawyer at the National Security Council telling you in terms of whether or not this was legal?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, Andrea, I'm not going to go into internal deliberations. It was a carefully considered decision and the attorney general has spoken to the legal authorities under which this takes place.

QUESTION: How does this affect you as America's chief diplomat? You had difficulties in Europe defending U.S. position regarding the allegations of secret prisons in Eastern Europe. How does this affect our reputation overseas?

SECRETARY RICE: I think that people understand that America is a country of laws, it is a country that defends and protects those laws. This is an issue of the President's constitutional authority as the President of the United States; and so it is appropriate that it is something that is spoken to by the Attorney General and, to the degree that needs be, spoken to by people who are asking questions of Congress. But in terms of our reputation abroad, I don't think there is any doubt that America is viewed as a country of laws. When I left Europe, we had any number of Foreign Ministers saying that they understood better what we were saying. Perhaps they didn't like every answer. But we're in a different kind of war. And people will have to understand that the President has a very strong belief in and obligation to protect our civil liberties and our civil rights. He also has a very strong obligation to protect us as a country. And unless you can detect terrorist plots -- you know, intelligence is the long pole in the tent in the fight against terrorism because once you've allowed somebody to commit the crime, then thousands of people have died. This is not traditional law enforcement. This is not even traditional intelligence. This is detection of activity in a very rapid way against shadowy networks that cross our domestic and foreign boundaries.

QUESTION: Do you have any concerns, personal concerns, about this becoming a slippery slope? Once you expand presidential authority, whether it's over domestic eavesdropping or secret prisons, that you're getting into an area that is potentially dangerous for this country long term?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first of all, I don't want to speak to specific intelligence issues, but I do want to speak to the need to remember that on September 11, we were both blind inside the country and we were deaf inside the country. And that couldn't be allowed to continue. If the United States is going to be protected from terrorists who know no boundaries, then it's necessary for the President to use his powers, his authorities under the Constitution and to use them legally. But I think the American people would expect the President to do everything that he can within the law to protect us. The President understands and I understand that we are a country of laws. We are a country that is particularly concerned with our civil liberties. They're enumerated, in ways that they are not for many countries, in our Constitution. They are the core of who we are. And the President is both going to protect us in -- physically and protect our civil liberties.

QUESTION: There's a new report today of eight prisoners of Guantanamo who say that they were held in a secret prison in Afghanistan and physically abused. They claimed it was torture. They said that they were beaten. They were denied food and water. And this has been substantiated by a human rights group.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, any such claims are always investigated. And I will say that there are often -- often lots of things are said, lots of things have gone around. They're going around often without evidence. If there is evidence, I would encourage it to -- encourage people to get in touch with those who can investigate it. There also have been repeated visits of international groups to Guantanamo to look at the conditions there. The fact is this --

QUESTION: This was the complaint -- this complaint was that they were held in Afghanistan where there were no Red Cross --

SECRETARY RICE: Well, Andrea, let's be realistic here. We have a choice. We pick up people on the battlefield clearly engaged in activities against the American forces, or terrorist activities, or links to terrorist organizations. We can either hold them or we can let them go. Eventually, they will be brought to justice. But I don't think anybody expects us to simply release terrorists into -- and people who we've -- who we've encountered on the battlefield in places like Afghanistan, just release them into the general population. It makes no sense. And in fact, we have released some people from Guantanamo who we've met again on the battlefield. We've tried to release as many people as possible. And when there have been cases where we felt that there was no reason -- want to any longer hold people, they've been released. Sometimes they've been released into the custody of home governments, sometimes they've been released more in general. But there are dilemmas here, and these are not easy answers; and it's facile to say well, you should just let them go. But this President has a responsibility to protect the American people, to protect our allies. And I would ask any who are concerned about detention in a place like Guantanamo, whether they would rather have dangerous people released into their midst.

QUESTION: Turning to Iraq, there's now been a release of prisoners, including "Mrs. Anthrax" and "Dr. Germ." These are two women who we were told for many years were deeply involved in secret biological warfare programs and other programs. Are you satisfied that these two women should be released from Iraqi prisons, and they're now traveling to Jordan?

SECRETARY RICE: The Iraqis have a process that is, I think, a fair process for bringing to justice those against whom they have evidence. I don't know the details of these cases at this point. But it does show that the process that the Iraqis are going through is one that is a process that tries to do justice; and the interesting thing is that under Saddam Hussein, of course, there was not even the pretense of a system of justice.

QUESTION: Do you have any regrets, personal regrets, about some of the rhetoric that you and others in the Administration used about mushroom clouds and other rather frightening suggestions of weapons of mass destruction, now that we know that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, first of all, weapons of mass destruction are frightening, and they're frightening particularly in the hands of a tyrant, and they're frightening when the international community can't get answers from a tyrant like Saddam Hussein.

QUESTION: It was the predicate for war.

SECRETARY RICE: It was the -- but it was also the belief of intelligence agencies around the world, the UN Security Council that kept asking Saddam Hussein to answer for large stores of unaccounted-for weapons materials. And so, Andrea, the fact of the matter is that what you say, what you know today can affect what you do tomorrow. It can't affect what you did yesterday. And what we know today is simply the case that perhaps he did not have the stocks of weapons of mass destruction that we thought he had. But was he a threat? Absolutely he was a threat. This was someone who had used weapons of mass destruction in the past. This was someone who was filling his own country with -- mass graves with his own people. This was someone who was flying -- shooting at our aircraft, trying to fly no-fly zones to keep his forces under control, someone paying suicide bombers who committed atrocities against Israel. This was a threatening presence in the most volatile region in the world. And after 17 resolutions and time and time again, it was time to take care of him.

QUESTION: Your predecessor Colin Powell said that his presentation to the UN he now feels is a blot on his record of public service, and also that he felt that in retrospect Dick Cheney and Don Rumsfeld were going to the President behind his back. Do you feel that there was a deliberate attempt to mislead?

SECRETARY RICE: I actually don't know. I don't know to what Secretary Powell was referring. Colin and I are very good friends, and I think he was a terrific Secretary of State. I think he had an excellent relationship with the President, and I think he had access to the President whenever he wanted access to the President. And on all decisions of any import, the President heard the views of everybody who had a view.

QUESTION: Carl Levin said -- the member the Armed Services Committee, said to Tim Russert that if the Sunnis and the Shiites cannot work out their problems, we need to pressure them; that the U.S. now needs to really put pressure on the Iraqis to get this political process, now that they've successfully had this extraordinary election. How much pressure should the U.S. put on the Iraqis to come together and fix their constitution and make the other tough political decisions they need to make?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, of course it has to be an Iraqi process. And I think there's a presumption in the question that we somehow more want a working Iraq, an effective government than the Iraqis do. I think they actually want an effective government. I think they understand that they need to overcome their sectarian differences. I hear one voice talking about civil war; that's Zarqawi. I hear most Iraqis talking about trying to form a unified Iraq on the basis of democratic principles where all their interests can be represented.

Our Ambassador Zal Khalilzad has excellent relations with the Iraqis. He's been very engaged. He was very engaged at the time of the writing of the constitution. He'll be very engaged now in helping them. But it is also an Iraqi process and that's the whole point of democracy is that people have to come to terms. I think they will.

QUESTION: How big a threat is Iran, especially with the new Iranian President saying that Israel should be wiped off the map and that there was no Holocaust, denying the Holocaust?

SECRETARY RICE: I don't think there is any doubt that this Iranian President has sharpened the contradictions greatly. He's made it very clear that whatever was once a face of Iran that perhaps looked more diplomatic, perhaps is not what the Iranian regime is really all about. These are outrageous statements and they're dangerous statements. They're dangerous --

QUESTION: Do they help you persuade the Europeans to side with us against Iran?

SECRETARY RICE: I think people are clearly starting to see that it is outrageous for the President of Iran to say these things with one breath, and on the other breath, to say that the world can trust Iran with technologies that would lead to a nuclear weapon. And the Iranians, of course, there's the nuclear issue; we're working with the EU-3. But there is also Iranian support for terrorism in the Palestinian territories with Hezbollah. There is the decision or the ability of an unaccounted few -- unaccountable few inside Iran to repress and frustrate the desires of its own people. But the Middle East that Iran wants and apparently is prepared to work for is fundamentally different than the Middle East that is emerging, and certainly one that is at odds with American interests.

QUESTION: Now I know you have repeatedly denied any interest in national office and running for national office. You've said you wanted to be NFL Commissioner, after you resume your academic career. You accurately predicted Redskins over Dallas. Do you want to predict Redskins over the Giants next week?

SECRETARY RICE: I'll see how it's going, closer to the time. I'll get back to you. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Thank you very much, Madame Secretary.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

2005/1197

Released on December 19, 2005

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