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Interview with Jonathan Karl of ABC News

Secretary Colin L. Powell

Hyatt Hotel
Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt
November 23, 2004

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, thank you for doing this interview. You had dinner last night with the Iranian foreign minister, how was that?

SECRETARY POWELL: Very pleasant. We just happened to be seated next to each other, at the instigation, I suspect, of our Egyptian host. And we made polite dinner conversation.

QUESTION: Talked about anything substantively at all?

SECRETARY POWELL: No, it was mostly polite dinner conversation. It was pleasant.

QUESTION: The Egyptians...

SECRETARY POWELL: No reason to be discourteous, even though sometimes you disagree about some issues.

QUESTION: The Egyptians say that both of you agreed to it. Did they seating assignments to both of you?

SECRETARY POWELL: No, I never was aware of the seating arrangement until I walked in there, and I saw that he was going to be sitting next to me and that was fine by me. And then he showed up a few minutes late and saw where his place was and sat down, shook hands and enjoyed dinner and made polite conversation.

QUESTION: Now, the United States stands virtually alone in the world as a country that has no diplomatic ties with Iran. Is it time at some point to re-think that?

SECRETARY POWELL: In due course, but I think there is a history here, a twenty-five year history of difficult relations with Iran. I think many nations in the world recognize that Iran presents problems to the international community. Its nuclear weapons development program which we think they have working on all of these years. Their support of terrorist activity and other activities that we have found to be inconsistent with their obligations as a member of the international community. And the United States has not turned away or shied away from pointing out the problems that we have seen in Iranian behavior. I think it's appropriate for us to do so. Many nations agree with us. Many nations do not, they think we are overreacting. They thought we were overreacting during the first couple of years of this administration when we called attention to their nuclear programs. Finally, the International Atomic Energy Agency got evidence of it and dissidents started providing information that made it clear the Iranians were doing things that the world did not know about and were troubling. That is why the European Union got involved and the three foreign ministers got involved. They didn't get involved because there was nothing else to do that day. They got involved because they realized there was a problem with Iran's programs.

QUESTION: But you think, in due course, it would make sense to revisit the idea of talking directly to Iran?

SECRETARY POWELL: In due course, that might turn out to be the case. But I am not predicting anything at this point. We will have to see changes in behavior. It is not in the best interest of international relations for there to be a permanent enmity or animosity between two states. But conditions have to be present before you can simply walk away, not only the twenty-five year history, but current behavior that we believe is inconsistent with their obligation with respect to terrorism, support of organizations such as Hizbollah and their nuclear programs.

QUESTION: After all we do have relations with other countries with which we have grave concerns about?

SECRETARY POWELL: Yes. Some we do. Some we don't. We don't have relations with North Korea. We have concerns about their program there. We have relations with Syria and we have some differences with Syria. So it's not a cookie cutter world that we live in. And I have found in my career as Secretary of State, before that as Chairman and as National Security Advisor, that each one of these presents a different set of circumstances, a different set of political issues, diplomatic issues that you have to work with, each one bringing its own history to the situation.

QUESTION: The United States has said that a nuclear-armed Iran is intolerable. So what's the tipping point? At what point does the U.S. need to consider military action to stop Iran from getting the bomb?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, the United States has all of its options open. We are not considering any military action. We think that the last several years, as a result really of the United States' prodding, the United States' nagging the international community, we have put a spotlight and a heat lamp on Iran's programs. The EU-3 – and I support what they have done- have now come forward with a new agreement from the Iranians that they will stop all of this effort. After running through a quick batch of yellowcake to produce [inaudible] in a hurry before they had to stop running the programs and that IAEA will verify that. That's good. That's a spotlight, the heat lamp that puts some restraints on what they are doing.

But they've made commitments in the past that they would suspend. Remember this is only a suspension, which means that it's at their choice as to whether they will start these enrichment and conversion activities again in the future. So I think that's a way of bringing international attention to this.

And so we're looking for a diplomatic solution, we're looking for a political solution. We hope that Iran will realize in due course that it is not in their interest to move in the direction of a nuclear weapon or a program that could lead to a weapons. I am pleased that the EU-3 is involved. I'm pleased that the IAEA is involved. I am pleased that the Russians have realized that it is best to provide fuel for the reactor at Bushehr, to make sure that all the spent fuel coming out is recovered and sent back to the Russian Federation, so it doesn't become misused, shall we say. So the international community is seized with this problem and is applying pressure on Iran. And hopefully, ultimately, Iran will discover, decide, in its own time that it is best not to move forward with this matter.

QUESTION: Moving to the Palestinian and Israeli issue. Marwan Barghouti, you talked a little bit about while you were in the region, some people see him as a Palestinian Nelson Mandela, a popular Palestinian leader. The Israelis say he is a murderer, who is responsible for the deaths of twenty-six Israelis, at least. Who is right?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, he has been convicted by the Israeli government, and he is serving a sentence. He is esteemed in the Palestinian community, but at the moment he is serving a sentence in jail. It is not clear to me if that he is interested in being a candidate in the first place. And so the Palestinians are going to have to make their judgment as to who they wish to see offered a candidacy for president of the Palestinian Authority.

I am pleased that they and the Israelis are working together now to see that there is a good election on the 9th of January and the Israelis have said that they would allow movement to take place within the territories so that people can campaign, so people can get out and vote when the time comes. I am also pleased that Palestinians and Israelis have found a way to deal with the problem of Palestinians living in East Jerusalem so that they have an opportunity to express their will at the ballot box.

QUESTION: If Barghouti runs, many people think he will win because he is popular with the Palestinians. Could the United States deal with somebody ...?

SECRETARY POWELL: You choose to focus on Mr. Barghouti. I don't even know that he is a candidate. I am focusing on those who are, now, offering themselves up for candidacy and are members of the Palestinian Authority or the Palestinian governing body and political parties who are now examining what the possibilities of their winning such an election are. Mr. Barghouti who, as I said, is in the custody of the Israeli government.

QUESTION: OK, moving to Iraq then. Some Pentagon officials are saying that they believe that the Iraqi security forces simply will not be ready to do what they are supposed to do in terms of providing security for the election. What do we do if that is the case, and how did we get into this situation where the Iraqi security forces are still so inadequate?

SECRETARY POWELL: It takes time to build a force normally. And in the case of Iraq, you're building an army at the same time you're building a police force at the same time you're building up border patrols and a lot of other security institutions that are needed for a country. And it isn't just a matter of giving somebody two weeks' training in a rifle and you have an army. So it will take time to build this force up.

We fully expect at the time of the elections, the 30th of January, there will be a significantly larger number of Iraqi troops in the field, Iraqi battalions in the field. But there will still be a need for coalition forces, for the multinational force, to be present. So between the multinational force presence and the ground strength and the growing size of the Iraqi

security forces, hopefully that will be enough to provide the security that the countryside is going to need to have elections on the 30th of January, 2005.

QUESTION: Pentagon officials are also saying that they may need a larger troop presence in time for the elections.

SECRETARY POWELL: That's a judgment they'll have to make and maybe they will. I don't know. There is always a Pentagon official somewhere and there is always a State Department official somewhere who has a point of view. But I know that the commander on the ground, General Casey, is examining with somebody on a regular basis and he will provide his recommendations to General Myers, who will then provide them to Secretary Rumsfeld, and he to the president. And they will make their judgment as to what troop strength they need there at that particular time.

It will be a moment of high tension because there are still these insurgents who don't want to see elections, who don't want the Iraqi people to decide how they will be governed. They want to do the governing. They want to go back to the past. They want to go back to the great old days of Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi people don't want to go there, and the international community isn't going to let it happen. That's one of the messages that came out of the conference that we're finishing here in Sharm El Sheikh. And so I am sure that our military commanders, working with Ambassador Negroponte, and providing recommendations back to Washington, both to Defense and to State, will determine what the proper force level is to make sure they can have this election safely at the end of January.

QUESTION: But do you think we made a mistake early on in terms of not acting decisively in stopping the insurgents right after the war? I mean, many were saying we need more troops. We need more and more decisive action.

SECRETARY POWELL: There is a great deal of looking back as to what might have been done differently. I will say that we did not anticipate the insurgency growing as large as it has or as active as it has. But it is always easy to look back and to see those things in hindsight.

It was a decisive win on the battlefield by the coalition forces, led by American forces, and with British, Australian and Polish forces involved, actually defeated this enemy in Iraq at the time. But the actual occupation of the whole country was a much more difficult proposition. And we didn't anticipate, perhaps, the total collapse of the civil and security administration forces that took place.

QUESTION: Finally, I saw you say earlier this year: Colin Powell will not write a tell- all book. So, what do you say? Will you write a book?

SECRETARY POWELL: I have no plans to write a book. I want to retire and get a little rest and then examine what my options are. I intend to be seen in public life in some capacity and not necessarily in government. But I intend expect to remain in public life, but also have a private life as well. I'm looking forward to it. Maybe at some point in the future, I will write a book, but I can assure you I am not in touch with any publishers at the moment.

QUESTION: All right, Secretary Powell, thank you very much.

SECRETARY POWELL: Thanks, Jonathan.

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