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Interview on ABC's Good Morning America

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

New York City

May 10, 2006

MR. GIBSON: Madame Secretary, the Iranian President sends a long letter to President Bush which is the first direct communication we've had at the top of government with Iran in 27 years, so why dismiss it out of hand?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the letter really doesn't address, Charlie, any of the issues that are there between the Iranians and the international community. It really doesn't offer a solution to the nuclear impasse, it doesn't talk about Iran's role in terrorism around the world, and there really isn't anything there to consider it a diplomatic overture. It's, rather, a broad, kind of philosophical, really, attack on the President and on his policies and I don't think you can consider that a diplomatic opening.

MR. GIBSON: But we have said that we wanted to exhaust all diplomatic avenues with Iran before we took more Draconian steps. Isn't this at least something of an overture?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the way to make certain that we have taken all the diplomatic steps that we can is to do what we've just done here over the last day or so. We met with -- I met with my counterparts from the Permanent 5 of the Security Council, including Russia and China, and then, of course, with Germany, which has been a part of the EU-3 effort with Iran. We agreed that we will continue to seek a Security Council resolution, but that we would wait for a couple of weeks while the Europeans design an offer to the Iranians that would make clear that they have a choice that would allow them to have a civil nuclear program if that is, indeed, what they want.

But we are all in agreement that the Security Council has got to send a very strong message to Iran that it can't continue to defy the international community. And that's what we're going to do and we felt that waiting a couple of weeks is the way to allow diplomatic options to be fully pursued.

MR. GIBSON: Madame Secretary, I've seen wildly varying estimates as to really how close the Iranians are to being able to build a nuclear weapon. What's your estimate?

SECRETARY RICE: The estimates vary around the world and they vary depending on what you think the Iranians have already achieved. And that's why I think our job is to work as quickly as we possibly can to get a diplomatic solution to this problem. The Iranians clearly are continuing to march along in their nuclear activities and it is important that we act, but we have time to act. That's why we're going to continue to pursue this diplomatic course. We're going to continue to pursue the tactical agreement with the Russians and the Chinese on how we go forward. But in fact, no one, no one in the international system is prepared to allow the Iranians to get a nuclear weapon.

MR. GIBSON: Well, Vice President Cheney said back in March, and it was a very simple sentence, "We will not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon." That's about as declarative a sentence as you can have. Is that our bottom line and what's it mean?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, it has to be the bottom line and it has to be the bottom line of the international community. How can you contemplate an Iranian nuclear weapon in the world's most volatile region? That would set off proliferation of nuclear technology and weaponry throughout that region. And Iran is not a responsible state. This is a state that is a central banker of terrorism. This is a state in which its president talks about wiping a state, Israel, off the map. This isn't a responsible state. And so the world has to mobilize to prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon.

MR. GIBSON: But what does it mean when you make a simple declarative sentence like that? Does it mean, if necessary, we would take military action to stop it?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, of course, the President doesn't take any options off the table and I don't think anybody wants the American President to take his options off the table. But the President's also made very clear that we are committed to a diplomatic course. We fully believe that a diplomatic course of a unified international community will bring the Iranians to understand that they have no choice but to agree to a civil nuclear program that the international community can support.

MR. GIBSON: A question, if I may, about Iraq. The incoming prime minister says he is nearly ready to form a government. What's "nearly ready" mean? Are we talking about days here?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think the prime minister is the one who is developing his own calendar. They have 30 days from the time of the designation of the prime minister. He made very clear to me, when I talked to him, that he'd like to do it more quickly than that. But they're also trying to make certain that they put together a really competent, good government with ministers who will not have sectarian tendencies, ministers in whom all the Iraqi people can have confidence, and people who are really competent to run their ministries. So if it takes them a little time to get there, I think we have every interest in having this be a really competent government and a government of national unity.

MR. GIBSON: Madame Secretary, all the best. Thank you very much.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you very much.

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