

Interview on The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer

Secretary Colin L. Powell

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(11:45 a.m. EST)

MR. LEHRER: Mr. Secretary, welcome.

SECRETARY POWELL: Thank you, Jim.

MR. LEHRER: Is postponing the election in Iraq under serious consideration by either the U. S. or the Iraqi Government now?

SECRETARY POWELL: No. The Iraqi Government has made it very, very clear that they want to go forward with these elections on the 30th of January and we are fully supporting them, as is the international community and the United Nations. It's important for the Iraqi people to have this opportunity to speak their voice and to say how they wish to be governed by electing a Transitional National Assembly that will give them the transitional government. So we are all ahead full for an election on the 30th of January.

MR. LEHRER: What would constitute a successful result of these elections?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, we're -- it's absolutely clear that there will be large turnouts in the Kurdish area, in the Shia area, in most of the provinces of Iraq. What we're going to have to look at very carefully is the turnout in the Sunni area. And I cannot predict to you what that turnout is liable to look like. I think if it wasn't for the insurgency, the turnout would be quite high. I think the Sunnis want to have an opportunity to speak, with respect to how they wish to be led as well.

And so I think a successful election will be an election where most of the population has gotten a chance to vote. And even though we may not get the same kind of numbers in the Sunni area, we're going to have to go forward and use the result of this election to build on.

MR. LEHRER: So what if the Sunnis do not vote? Or, let's put it this way: What if the result is not considered representative of the Sunnis of Iraq? What happens then?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, I don't -- I don't want to deal with that hypothetically because I think there will be sufficient turnout so that you get a sense of what the Sunnis want to do. And we have to go forward, and I hope that the Iraqi Electoral Commission will be able to make a judgment that it is sufficiently representative. Because if we don't find it

representative, or say the election doesn't count, then essentially the insurgents have won. We have allowed some murderers and terrorists and bomb-makers to thwart the will of all of the people of the country.

So I think we are going to go ahead and have this election, see what the results are like, form a Transitional National Assembly; and in the formation of that Assembly, based on the vote, and then in the government that flows from that, where the Assembly will figure out how to put in place the cabinet and select prime ministers, I hope that they will ensure that all parts of the society are adequately represented within the transitional government that is formed as a result of the election.

MR. LEHRER: So in other words, even if the election -- if the Sunnis are not able to vote, or do not vote in large numbers, that can be adjusted afterward? Is that what you're saying?

SECRETARY POWELL: No. No, that is exactly what I'm not saying. You cannot adjust the vote. And 275 individuals will be elected to the Transitional National Assembly, and that's fixed in the law under which this election is being held.

But that Transitional National Assembly will then go about the task of creating a government. And those government positions will be appointed positions: cabinet members, prime ministers, a selection of all the leaders of a new transitional government, waiting for the full election, a year from now, the end of this year. And in the selection of that appointed government, then you can make adjustments with respect to what groups hold what cabinet positions that might give the Sunnis greater encouragement that their interests will be represented by the nature and composition of the transitional government that is formed. But it will be the election itself that determines which 275 people are in that Transitional National Assembly.

MR. LEHRER: Do you share the concern of former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and others that if the Sunni situation is not resolved that this election could result -- could slide toward a civil war? In other words, could cause more problems than it resolves?

SECRETARY POWELL: There are many alternatives one can look at. Brent happened to focus on that one. I can also give you an alternative that says the very fact that the Iraqi people are able to have an election will give some encouragement to all of the factions inside Iraq and will encourage them to come together in a more comprehensive way to deal with this insurgency. And so I don't know what the outcome will be, and all we're doing is speculating on what that outcome will be.

MR. LEHRER: Sure.

SECRETARY POWELL: The one thing I'm sure of, and here is where I would agree with General Scowcroft, is that the insurgency is not going away as a result of this election. In fact, perhaps, the insurgents might become more emboldened if they see that they are not

persuading the Iraqi people [not] to participate in this new government. The insurgency is going to have to be defeated in the field; and it will be defeated by coalition forces, by increasingly capable and growing Iraqi forces, and I also hope it will be defeated in a political sense because a Transitional National Assembly is no longer a creation of the United States, or the coalition or the creation of the United Nations. It's a creation of the Iraqi people. And I hope that the Iraqi people will then want to see that Transitional National Assembly and the new government that's formed from it successful. And it can only be successful if the Iraqis come together and start to push back on these insurgents and on these murderers and help their military and police forces and the coalition military forces defeat the insurgency.

MR. LEHRER: Mr. Secretary, why has the insurgency turned out to be so much stronger and deadlier than the U.S. anticipated going in?

SECRETARY POWELL: Because there are many former members of the regime, outside terrorists who have come in, who want to go back to the past. They want to go back -- they're, for the most part, Sunnis -- and they want to go back to the privileged past, where they had all the power; they suppressed the Kurds; they murdered Kurds; they suppressed the Shias; they destroyed the homelands of the Shias in the marsh areas in the south, and that's what they want to go back to. And so they are afraid of this kind of movement forward into democracy, and they are fighting. And they have been able to garner support, and they have been able to put together a rather dangerous and difficult-to-deal-with insurgency.

But the American commanders on the ground, the coalition commanders on the ground and, increasingly, the Iraqi commanders on the ground, I think, will create the necessary military and police and intelligence capability to bring the insurgency under control. But it's going to take time and it isn't going to -- it certainly isn't going to happen overnight.

MR. LEHRER: Speaking as an old infantry officer, Mr. Secretary, do you feel if we'd put more troops on the ground at the beginning we could have nipped the insurgency in the bud?

SECRETARY POWELL: The insurgency really wasn't there at the very beginning. And obviously, there were enough troops to deal with the Iraqi army. It will be a subject of considerable discussion and analysis for many, many years in the future as to what should have been done in those early months with respect to imposing will throughout the country so that this kind of insurgency wouldn't take root.

But it did take root. And the military has been responding ever since by increasing our troop presence. Remember, we had hoped that by now the troop strength would be, oh, 100,000 or less. Instead, it is 150,000. And so, the commanders have recognized that they require greater troop strength and the President has authorized a higher troop strength for the time being.

MR. LEHRER: You mentioned the Iraqi army at the beginning of the war. Post-war Administrator Paul Bremer has caught a lot of heat for disbanding the Iraqi army. Yesterday,

he defended that action. He said, in fact, things would be worse if he had not disbanded the Iraqi army. Do you agree with him?

SECRETARY POWELL: Well, you know, I don't really know. There are two strong points of view here. One of the things we might have done, however, is after disbanding the Iraqi army, as we got deeper into the insurgency and into the summer and fall, perhaps we should have been a little more aggressive in creating a new Iraqi army to replace that which had fallen apart, as Jerry describes it, and was no longer there.

And that's what we're doing now, building up the new Iraqi army as quickly as we can, putting a lot of money into it, a lot of energy into it, a lot of recruiting is going on for police forces, national guard and the regular army.

MR. LEHRER: A lot of people are still dying every day, Mr. Secretary.

SECRETARY POWELL: It is a raging insurgency, and we are not trying to dismiss it or downplay it. We're going to have to defeat it, because they have demonstrated the ability every day to go after Iraqi police officers, to go after Iraqi national guard and military, and to come after coalition forces as well. They will not be done in by an election alone, and they will not be done in by a change of heart. They're going to have to be defeated as an insurgency.

MR. LEHRER: Yesterday, the White House officially confirmed that the two-year hunt for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq is now over. Do you now regret your own role in making the case for war based on the weapons of mass destruction argument?

SECRETARY POWELL: I regret that the information that we had, provided by the intelligence community was not correct with respect to actual stockpiles of weapons.

There is no question that we were correct with respect to the nature of the regime of Saddam Hussein, the fact that he'd used such weapons in the past, that he had the intention to have them again and he had the capability to have them again. And he was never going to give up that capability, and some might believe that if we had lifted sanctions and said, oh, everything is fine in Iraq, he never would have returned to that kind of behavior. I'm not one of those.

Where we were wrong was that there were not existing stockpiles. But the presentation I made to the United Nations on the 5th of February was the best international information that was available to us. It represented the judgment of our integrated intelligence community, the judgment of intelligence communities in other nations. It's also the body of intelligence that had been presented to the Congress when the Congress passed its resolution before that. And it was the body of intelligence that President Clinton relied upon when he believed it was necessary to bomb Iraq back in 1998.

So do I regret that the information was wrong? Sure. All of us do. We need to find out why we were mistaken with respect to this. But at the time I made that presentation to the United

Nations, it represented the view of the United States and most international intelligence communities.

MR. LEHRER: And you're satisfied with your own role in that, that you asked the right questions and that you pursued what was available to -- what you considered to be the rightful conclusion at the time? You have no regrets about that?

SECRETARY POWELL: I pushed as hard as I could in the five days that I had to bring the presentation together, but the information that I presented was information that had been in National Intelligence Estimates for months and months, in documents that had been presented to the Congress, in documents that, in some cases, were public, in documents that were presented to all of the members of the National Security Council: The President, the Vice President, Secretary Rumsfeld, Dr. Rice, myself.

The presentation that I pulled together, and which I challenged to make sure that it was the best we had, and I was assured by Director Tenet and the other members of the Director of Central Intelligence operation, this was solid information. Our information and intelligence is not always perfect --

MR. LEHRER: Sure.

SECRETARY POWELL: -- but it was solid, and it was something that we could rely on. The Congress had relied on it. President Clinton had relied on it. President Bush was relying on it and I took it, asked tough questions, and presented it to the Security Council. And what turned out not to be the case of the information I presented was the existence of current stockpiles.

MR. LEHRER: Sure. On the Middle East, Mr. Secretary, there's a new Palestinian president. There's a new coalition government in Israel. Do you believe there is now an opportunity to do something dramatic and real to resolve the situation over there?

SECRETARY POWELL: Yes, I do. I believe there is a new opportunity. Yasser Arafat is no longer there as an obstacle to be pointed to by anyone. And so we have a new Palestinian President, Abu Mazen, who enjoys, now, the support through an election of his people. And it's important for him, now, to reform the Palestinian Authority, fight against terror, speak against terror and do the things that are expected of him in the roadmap. And it is equally important for Israel to discharge its obligations under the roadmap. And I'm pleased that Prime Minister Sharon and President Abu Mazen are now talking to each other about when they can get together, the level of cooperation that is starting to develop and build. We saw it as Israel facilitated the Palestinian election.

President Bush and the members of his team are ready to engage fully. I've been in touch with both sides, and I know that Dr. Rice, when she takes over for me next week, will be fully engaged with both sides as well.

MR. LEHRER: Do you agree with conventional wisdom both among the Palestinians and

the Israelis, as well as Americans that this isn't going to get done without really heavy involvement by the United States?

SECRETARY POWELL: It always requires heavy involvement of the United States, and the President has always been ready to provide that commitment and that involvement. But you have to have something to work with. Until the passage of Mr. Arafat from the scene and this election, frankly, we were frustrated with what we had to work with. Israel did not see chairman Arafat as a partner for peace. And I can tell you through my own person experience and the experience of this Administration that we were frustrated repeatedly in our efforts to work with chairman Arafat.

And so he is not on the scene any longer. Prime Minister Sharon is going ahead with the removal of settlements from Gaza and some in the West Bank. And I hope that this can serve to jump-start the process. Everybody has said, we want to get rid of settlements, and now, the Israeli Prime Minister is getting rid of settlements. So let's build on that. Let's build on that by the Palestinians being ready to take over Gaza, to provide security in Gaza, to make sure rockets don't continue to come out of Gaza, and then we can move forward.

The President is willing to do that with political capital, with financial assistance, and we think this is a moment of opportunity.

MR. LEHRER: You've just returned from a trip to the worst hit areas of the tsunami in South Asia. What is the single-most important thing the American people need to know about that tragedy, Mr. Secretary?

SECRETARY POWELL: It was a tragedy of unprecedented size and scope -- 11 or 12 countries hit by this single event, and these countries are separated by thousands of miles on different continents.

You can't imagine, Jim, the power of these waves as they hit and how they simply scoured the land, taking out all vegetation, all homes, roads, bridges, cars, boats and thousands and thousands of lives in just a few moments. And so this was the kind of tragedy that demanded an outpouring of support, not only from the American people, from the international community. And that is now happening.

We have to make sure that the support that is coming forward and the money that's going to be made available is used properly. Each one of the countries hit has a different set of needs, and we have to assess those needs and make sure that we're not just throwing money into areas where the need isn't clearly identified.

But I think it's been a magnificent response on the part of the international community. I'm very proud about what we did and what our young men and women on our ships at sea are doing now, and what our diplomats are doing, and what our United States Agency For International Development is doing to help the countries in greatest need. And the countries that are in greatest need are: Indonesia, especially in the north and Banda Aceh. Sri Lanka needs a lot of help, Thailand less so. India is able to take care of its own needs. Maldives,

Seychelles, some of the others will have needs as well.

MR. LEHRER: Are you concerned about these new rules that the Indonesian Government has laid down for aid in the Aceh area?

SECRETARY POWELL: No. They're much -- I've read a lot over the last 24 hours about what the new rules allegedly are. Our ships had to go out to sea. That's not the case. Our ships move in and out as they need to for operating purposes or to keep our aircrews trained. These are -- this is an aircraft carrier, and some of our sailors and marines are armed when they go ashore. Some don't have a need for weapons. So rules have not been imposed on our operation. We're doing well.

The other set of rules with respect to providing security for NGOs that are going out into the countryside; that seems to me to be a sensible precaution to take. Although the reports I'm getting suggest that NGOs are able to move freely, whether they've been able to arrange for security or not. So I don't find these rules and -- such as they are, if they are rules, that imposing. The relief effort goes on.

The Indonesian Vice President said he would like to see the foreign presence over in three months' time. That wasn't a deadline. It was an expectation that the work would be finished and there would not be a need for foreign troops after three months. But I can tell you that we are cooperating very well with the Indonesians, with the Thais, with the Sri Lankans and with the other nations that are affected. And the one thing I came back from my trip with was a strong sense of the appreciation they feel for what President Bush and this Administration and the American people have done.

MR. LEHRER: All right. Mr. Secretary, thank you very much.

SECRETARY POWELL: Thank you, Jim.

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