

Interview on ABC's This Week With George Stephanopoulos and Peter Jennings

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

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MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: And we are joined now in her first interview as Secretary of State with Condoleezza Rice. Madame Secretary, congratulations.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you very much, George.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: You know that Peter Jennings is in Baghdad.

SECRETARY RICE: I do.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: He has a couple of questions as well. But let me just start out. Has the election in Iraq today been the success you hoped for?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, every indication is that the election in Iraq is going better than could have been expected. The Iraqi people are very brave. What we're seeing here, I think, is the emergence of an Iraqi force for freedom. I have listened to some of the anecdotes from the field: a 94-year-old woman being taken there by her son; people taking their children so that they can see the vote; people saying that they were not going to be deterred by the terrorists. Of course, there are many, many difficult days ahead, but this has been an extraordinary day so far for the Iraqi people.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: We've heard some pretty wild variations on turnout. International observers say about 50, 55 percent. Iraqi election officials maybe 70, 72 percent. What are you hearing?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we're hearing these conflicting numbers, too. And I think, George, it will be a while before we know what the turnout was exactly. But the Iraqi people have clearly turned out and they've clearly done this because they recognize that the vote is their opportunity for a different kind of future. They are affirming what we've always known, that democratic principles don't have boundaries, they're not Western values; these are universal values. And I think this is just an extraordinary day for very brave people.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Peter.

MR. JENNINGS: George, not to contradict the Secretary, but I think she appropriately says we don't know the results yet, it'll take a while, and I don't want to be unnecessarily skeptical. But, in fact, the Iraqis seem to have people turned out in some places and not turned out in others. In Anbar Province, which has been of great concern to the Administration and to the Iraqi Government, the turnout does not look to have been very good. I'm not so sure it's good in Mosul in the north. Certainly, very enthusiastic here in Baghdad.

But, Madame Secretary, first of all, congratulations. Your appointment very much noted here in Iraq.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

MR. JENNINGS: Can I just ask you about the Sunni problem? However it gets presented today, I'm sure you know that in the post-election period you have a huge Sunni problem: If the Sunnis are not adequately represented in the government, there's not going to be any stability here no matter what today's numbers are.

What are you going to do about it?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, let's remember, Peter, that the Sunni population has been the population that has been most subject to terrible intimidation and violence from the thugs who would like to take them back to a very bad past, and so it's not surprising that it has been difficult for them to vote. But everything that we see is that it's not an absence of a desire to vote, but rather that there is wide-scale intimidation in some of these regions.

Nonetheless, I feel heartened and I think the Iraqis have been heartened by the comments of innumerable leaders -- Shia, Kurd and others -- that they expect to be one Iraq, that they expect the Sunni population to be represented in their views as they go to writing a constitution, because this election is a first step, not the final step, on the road to Iraqi democracy. So I think you will see, after this election, an effort to bring all Iraqis together for a better future.

MR. JENNINGS: Well, I take your point on this only being the first step. But Adnan Pachaci today, one of the leading Sunni secular leaders, said he was worried about the degree of the turnout. And it is similarly true, as you know, ma'am, that many Sunnis are not turning out because they think this is an illegitimate election in the presence of a U.S. occupation. How do you get around that? The war continues in a very, very vicious way.

SECRETARY RICE: Peter, I just think that you're seeing Sunnis who would like to turn out but who are concerned about the intimidation and violence. That's only clear and it's only understandable. But let's focus on this first step. You have Iraqis voting, Iraqis

finding their voice. You have Iraqis overcoming incredible intimidation and fear to do this. One Iraqi said that there's no longer fear in our hearts. I think that that's exactly what is happening here.

And this is a political process. They will now move to build one Iraq. They will bring the Sunnis into the process -- those who have felt outside the process -- and I think they have a bright future. But it's going to be difficult. Any political process built on the ruins of Saddam Hussein's tyranny is, of course, going to have its ups and downs. Every democratic process has its ups and downs. But look at what these people have achieved today.

MR. JENNINGS: Thank you, ma'am.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Thank you, Peter.

I think the question -- and you appropriately say it's the first step. The question on the minds of a lot of Americans is: Does this election mean our troops can come home? And you know Senator Kennedy gave a speech on Thursday where he said we should have an immediate withdrawal of 12,000 troops and then negotiate a specific timetable for withdrawal because, he says, for many Iraqis the war has become a war against the American occupation. I want to show you what else he said:

"We have reached the point that a prolonged American military presence in Iraq is no longer productive for either Iraq or the United States. The U.S. military presence has become part of the problem, not part of the solution."

What's your response to Senator Kennedy?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, my response to all of the talk about what we might do is to say let's do the job. We went to Iraq because it was important to overthrow one of the most brutal regimes in that region that was stopping progress in that region, that was dangerous -- that was dangerous --

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: But he says now the troops have become part of the problem.

SECRETARY RICE: We went for both for our own security and for the security of the region. So we have to finish the job. Now, obviously, the way to finish the job is to train Iraqi security forces. It's heartening to see how well they have performed today in support of these elections. And when they are trained and when we can step back, you can be certain that America wants to stay no longer than necessary.

But our forces are there under a United Nations mandate. They are there with coalition

forces because the Iraqis believe that they need them. We're going to be working with the new government to determine how the security picture should look after these elections. But we need to finish this job. We went there because our own security was involved. And I just have to say, when I've seen the pictures of American soldiers in some of the most dangerous parts of the region helping Iraqis vote, that it's hard to see that we're not doing our part there to advance democracy.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: *The Washington Post* reported this morning that military commanders are preparing, at least, to withdraw about 15,000 troops this spring. Do you think that's feasible?

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, we will look at the troop levels. The President will, of course, get a recommendation from his commanders on what the troop levels should be. The key here is that we want the troop levels -- ours, the coalition's, Iraqi forces -- to meet the conditions on the ground so that we can deal with whatever conditions there are on the ground.

And I am quite confident that the plans going forward will let the President know what the right troop levels are. But we need to focus on the training of Iraqi security forces, we need to focus on the right combination of coalition forces and Iraqi security forces, and we need to focus on what methods and what goals they need to achieve.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: So no fixed timetable saying this many troops have to be out by this date?

SECRETARY RICE: It all has to be conditional on the situation on the ground. That's the only way to make sure that we're successful.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: One final question on Iraq. *Newsweek* reported this morning that Iraqi officials believe they had Abu Mousab al-Zarqawi in custody in October. Can you confirm that?

SECRETARY RICE: I've seen these reports and I don't know that they're credible. That certainly isn't -- it doesn't accord with what we knew.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Let me turn now to Iran. In your Senate testimony you called it an outpost of tyranny. Are you concerned now by the role that Iran is playing in Iraq?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we certainly are concerned by the role that Iran has tried to play in Iraq. More importantly, the Iraqis are concerned about the role that Iran has been playing in Iraq. Iran is Iraq's neighbor and it's only natural that there will be links between Iran and Iraq. It's only natural that there will be relations there. And as long as those relations are transparent with the new government, we should have no objection to that, just as we've had no objection to Iran having relations with its Afghan neighbor.

But the Iranians need to understand that the Iraqis are going to build their own future, that it is going to be a future that is very different than the Iranian regime. We've seen that from all Iraqi parties in the way that they've commented on the kind of regime that Iran has. That's been our problem with Iran, that and some support for, perhaps for insurgents that is really not warranted.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: And you think that's still happening?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I do believe that the Iranians have not been particularly a force for stability and for good.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: I know you are also, of course, concerned about the Iranian nuclear program. And it seems as if, in the last couple of weeks, there seems to be more of a split between the United States and Europe over how to handle that nuclear program, some rumblings of military action here in Washington.

And your counterpart, Jack Straw, the British Foreign Secretary, gave this interview to the BBC. Here's what he had to say: "I don't see any circumstances in which military action would be justified against Iran."

Do you agree with that?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I've just met with Jack Straw and with my counterpart from Germany, and I have to say to say I don't see a developing split here. What I see is that the world understands that there has to be unity in getting the Iranians to see that they cannot be part of the international system and pursue a nuclear weapon at the same time. The IAEA has been, I think, very aggressive in dealing with the Iranians and telling them that they have to live up to their international obligations. In conversations with our European counterparts, we understand the EU-3 is pursuing this goal with the Iranians of stopping whatever the Iranians are doing.

The good thing is, George, several years ago, I think nobody was really listening to us when we said that the Iranians were pursuing, probably pursuing, a nuclear weapon under cover of a civilian nuclear power program, which would, of course, be in complete contravention of their obligations under the Nonproliferation Treaty. Now everybody is suspicious of that. Now people are telling the Iranians that you have to sign additional protocols. Now the Russians are telling the Iranians we can only finish your civilian power plant when you agree to additional protocols and to returning the fuel supply.

So I see a unifying theme here to the Iranians and we've been in very close contacts with the Europeans about what they're doing and hope that they succeed.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Do you support their efforts?

SECRETARY RICE: Look, anybody who can succeed in getting the Iranians to live up to their international obligations, obviously, will have our support.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Vice President Cheney, of course, raised some eyebrows a couple weeks ago when he suggested that some were worried that Israel might take matters in its own hands and go and do a nuclear -- a military strike against the Iranian nuclear program without asking anyone. Are you worried about that?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, an Iran that is nuclear-armed, of course, is going to be a force for instability in that region and all kinds of things are possible if Iran gets to a nuclear device that is usable. That's why we have focused so on the diplomacy, focused so on unifying the world around this theme, focused so on getting the Russians and others to recognize that even civilian nuclear engagement, civilian nuclear programs with the Iranians, have proliferation risks.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: But if Israel came to the United States -- and Dennis Ross has raised this possibility. If Prime Minister Sharon came to you, came to the President, and said, "I have to take action, would the United States try to dissuade him?"

SECRETARY RICE: George, you know I'm not going to speculate on such things. But the key is we have an obligation internationally to make sure that the Iranians live up to their international obligations because an Iran that pursues nuclear weapons, an Iran that gets a nuclear device, would be very dangerous to the region, would set up all kinds of forces of instability. There is no disagreement anywhere in the international community that that is the case.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: But then you can't rule out military action.

SECRETARY RICE: The President never takes any option off the table. But we believe, we believe fully, that this can be resolved by diplomatic means. All that we need is unity of purpose, unity of message to the Iranians, and the willingness to stay the course in terms of verification of anything that the Iranians are doing. And I think we're getting that kind of unity of purpose.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Let me turn now to your confirmation hearings. As you know, Senator Bayh is coming on the program afterwards. He voted against your confirmation, one of 13 senators, and that was more senators who voted against any secretary of state since Henry Clay in 1825. Why do you think that was?

SECRETARY RICE: I don't know, George. And I'm very gratified by the 85 who voted for my confirmation. Look, we can put all of this behind us. I can work with anyone.

The fact is we have had to do very difficult things over the last several years. It is not easy to confront a Middle East where the status quo is falling apart, where terrorism and Islamic extremism is growing, when you have in Saddam Hussein a brutal dictator,

dangerous to the region with his ambitions for the region and for weapons of mass destruction. Those things are not easy.

But over time I think that we will see that the policies that the President has adopted will have the benefit of a different kind of Middle East. We're seeing signs of that today in Iraq. No, it's not a perfect election. Yes, there are difficult times ahead. But did anyone think three years ago, with Saddam Hussein sitting in Iraq, that we would be seeing the Iraqi people turn out in these numbers to voice their desire for a democratic Iraq, a stable Iraq and an Iraq at peace with its neighbors?

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: There could also be signs of progress today in Israel, in the situation between Israel and Palestine. The Israelis have announced that they're going to be withdrawing forces from some West Bank, turning it over to Palestinians. It is a positive sign. I know you're going there next week. Is it time now, because the conditions seem to be improving, for more direct American involvement?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I said in my Senate confirmation hearings, the President has said, it is clearly time to try to seize this opportunity, the opportunity provided by the parties themselves, by the Gaza withdrawal plan of the Israelis, by the elections that have taken place in the Palestinian territories.

And when I go there I will be asking what can America do to support what I think is now a very clear desire by the parties to move beyond the troubles of the last several years and to try to build a permanent peace based on a two-state solution.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: And we introduced you for the first time today as Madame Secretary. How does it feel to be called that?

SECRETARY RICE: I keep looking around from time to time, but it's great. I have been very gratified by the men and women of the State Department, our Foreign Service, Civil Service and Foreign Service Nationals. They've all been enormously supportive. I've been saying to people that we have an historic opportunity here. There hasn't been a time like this, really, I think, since the late 1940s when the international system is clearly a lot is happening, a lot of pieces are moving. But we have a great opportunity to spread freedom and democracy as an antidote to this ideology of terror. I am gratified by the response of the men and women of the State Department and I believe that we're going to make a great team to try to carry out this historic agenda.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: And thanks very much for coming here for your first interview.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you very much. It's great to be with you.

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